

RIDEON

By

Patrick C Allen

One evening while under the stars I was enjoying some fresh air nearby a body of water close to my home in the highlands. A werewolf named RideonVoil appeared from the darkness that filled from underneath a collection of Douglas fir trees over yonder. It was this real life event that has inspired my pen and writings hereto. On this clear night under the light of a full moon my life was spared for the sake of this novel. Even some werewolves are literate souls.

Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locale is entirely coincidental.

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BEING THE FIRST PART OF
TRAILS OF ASCENSION

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A Werewolf Book

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*To Resa, all my love.
Also, thank you, Paul, for writing
"Grunt the Pot-Bellied Pig"*

FORWARD

A very long time ago there was a small troop of people that lived a very nomadic existence. The tribe started out as a small group of abducted cave members taken from all the human races that were available on Earth at the time of the selection which occurred many centuries ago B.C. The alien intervention was meant to replicate life on Earth. The lost tribe eventually found their own identity and were called “The Spear Hunters” and they were the people of the planet Mystic.

“The Spear Hunters” were those who followed the stars and the full moon was practically their god. Hardship forged their men and women into people with iron wills and they became great hunters of the plains and western highlands of the far away planet called Mystic. Their children stemmed from a large reservoir of genetic information that was a product of a millennium spent hunting on the continents, prairies, and mountains. During one long and cold winter the small tribe disappeared from the ranks of the living and only the bones and a few other clues remain.

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CHAPTER 1

Life had evolved on the planet Mystic and somewhat paralleled that of life on Earth. It was the twenty-first century there as well.

An old geezer walked up to where the young man was sitting. He was positioned on top of a log that had fallen many years before to the saber teeth of an earlier mountain man's saw. There was a ridge close by that over the decades the timber must have migrated down an inch at a time along with the brown sandy soil that was now filling up around it.

Rick's fishing pole was held by a small stick broken to form the cradle for his rod and his line was fully cast to the center of the pond. At the end of the line was a hook that the young man thought would surely snag a brown trout large enough to make at least a second dish.

An old geezer yawned out loud as he stretched his arms and rotated his hands way up high in the air, his torso seeming to sink deeper into his coveralls that were held taut at the shoulders by a strap made of blue jean denim.

"Should have brought my pole down with me," he said. "Looks like they're biting pretty good tonight," and he glanced away from the little round bobber for a moment to eye the fire that was dancing around inside the pit that had been used many times before. "Yep! Looks pretty good!" the old fellow said again.

Rick quickly pulled back hard on the line after he felt a tug from deep within the pond which brought the tip of the rod down. "He's taken it!" he exclaimed to the old man who was watching from a short distance away as he pulled against the power of the combative brown trout until at last he netted the fourteen-incher and then finally brought him in wriggling ashore. "Think I'd ought to clean it out right here on the bank?" he questioned the old man, testing his knowledge and making the elder somewhat nervous because fish cleaning ashore was illegal in these parts and above all not ethical.

The old man's nerves had already moved down to his toes, and they cringed inside of his boots. "No! You'd better wait," he responded. "That's no good for our lakes. I had the impression you'd been raised better than that, kid," the old man went on and on as he held onto his

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authoritative posture but finally let out a load of cackle and then pushed Rick on the shoulder in a friendly way. “These lakes belong to all of us, son, and we can’t let careless people ruin them for us, not even you! Just look at the city down below someday when you’re down there with someone if you don’t already know what I mean,” he said while looking on. “There are some law men down there that will put you in a darned box if you let them. It’s all in the mix, anyway!” the old man continued.

“What do you mean it’s all in the mix?” Rick asked of him.

“I can’t explain it to you right now. It’s just something that I see when I have dreams! But I know for sure that someday soon you’ll know about the mix!” the old man continued further.

“Ah! You’re crazy, old man!” Rick said sarcastically.

The young man could not resist the burning flame because as a teenager he had many youthful energies burning inside of him much like the burning fire. From within the fire pit Rick grabbed a red hot cindered stick that was half-burned already but was still partly burning at one end and it felt warm in his hand as he stirred the fire with it while he thought about what the old man had said to him about being locked up. He half leaned his body into the rising fire and then responded apologetically to the old man’s words of wisdom, “Don’t mind me! I really understand what you have said about the laws of our land. I was only getting smart with you, don’t you know! I just wanted to hear a lecture from you.”

“I didn’t give any lectures!” the old man said as he walked away and disappeared into the darkness of a nearby grotto.

A short time later that evening with the moon still high in the sky some coyotes launched intermittently into a night time song from a far away location farther down in the caverns where the old man had gone.

A strange scent began filling up the lake area from the darkened caverns that spread out and opened to the lake shore by means of a small stream. A slight wind gust erupted downstream and from out of the hollows the scent of death traveled upon the evening breeze towards Rick. It lingered for only a mere second of time and then dissipated into the night air.

It was a supernatural event, a report from another place in time, because there were no dead things around. Rick recognized it as such

because he'd experienced premonitions in his earlier years and of late they'd been occurring with increasing regularity, each one more complex than the last. He had never dared to tell anyone about them because although they were a fact of life to him they were simply unexplainable.

Rick's family was back at the house spread out in the kitchen doing chores, everyone, that is, except David. He was the father and it was his job to direct the evening's activities and also to play interference boss with the kids because he was quite good at handling everyone's tempers and tantrums that were apt to flare up from time to time.

"Where's Rick at?" the mother asked. "It's about time to serve up supper," she said lightly, knowing full well that he was down by the lake fishing.

"Okay," David said reassuringly. "I'll go get him".

Most times David stayed busy handling a chore of some sort as there was always something to do around the house. He had built the house with his own two hands over a couple of years' time so he enjoyed working on it quite a bit, but once a week he made sure there was time set aside for Rick and him to spend together. David was on his way out the front door when he heard his wife call to him, "Supper's in an hour." He knew she was purposely allowing plenty of time for him to meander down to the lake's edge where he could chat with Rick who would by now most likely have a line sunk and would also have a pretty good stringer of browntail trout set next to the shore.

This was stone-kicking time. It was a family tradition to go fishing and what better time than under the stars? He was well aware that life was too short not to spend a little time engaging in simple pleasures and so he followed the moonlit pathway through the darkness of the night and down the hills until finally from above he could see the light of the campfire reflected from the lake's surface.

There he saw two figures sitting motionless at the lake's edge as if their silhouettes had been painted onto a canvas. As they sat there fishing an echoing voice spewed out from the hollows. It was a canine howling that ricocheted down throughout the nearby caverns and poured into the basin. Perhaps it was signaling a message in an ancient way to another kindred survivor and to all that might listen. "The night

belongs to me, the night belongs to me,” the voice seemed to say as Rick’s father held his place at the ridge top for a moment or two longer to further listen to the choir of voices that echoed in response to the one lonesome coyote not too far away.

“Hey! What you fellers doing out here?” he asked as he approached the camp where the two were sitting comfortably atop the log. “Your mother’s a-workin’ on supper, boy, but don’t pay that no mind right now. We got time.”

“What do you mean ‘you fellers’, father? There is only me here,” Rick queried, wondering about what his father had said.

“But I thought I saw another person here with you. I’m sure of it! Where did he go?”

“Oh! About ten minutes ago there was a strange old man that came by but not within a shorter length of time and he did not stay long,” Rick declared.

“But I just seen him here. He was setting next to you on the log! There was somebody here. I know it!” David had decided.

“Don’t worry about it! It’s been a strange night already,” Rick said reassuringly.

“Okay, maybe it was a shadow or something that I saw,” David conceded and then pulled Rick’s stringer from the water revealing six big trout. “Looks like you’re learning,” he said as he grabbed a part of the fallen Douglas fir log and then sat down on it. “Yep! Looks like you’re learning very well,” he repeated while settling into his spot.

The two of them rested awhile longer that evening beside the water of the community lake but finally left the fishing spot and meandered back towards their home.

“It’s a good night,” one of the neighbors yelled from his porch as Rick and his dad shuffled their feet through a sandy pile of dirt on their way up the road to a pathway that would eventually lead them to their cabin. They chatted as they reached the pathway that was the last leg of their walk home.

“We got plenty of wood cut for the fireplace in the morning, Dad? I never chopped any tonight but went fishing instead,” Rick confessed.

“Oh, that’s all right, son. There’s plenty for the morning burn, and if there ain’t, your momma can handle it. You know your momma. She’ll

have plenty of it cut early tomorrow morning, long before we're up." At this remark both of them laughed loudly.

The sound of hard gravel crumbling filled the front room alerting the ladies that the men of the family were nearing home at last. "Come down here for a minute and open the door, Janet. They're home," the mother said as she ran over to the oven door and pulled out the browned freshly baked bread.

"Oh! That wonderful smell!" David said as the two of them entered the front doorway.

"Mm, mm!" exclaimed Rick as each of them pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Got some trout a-hangin' off the deck out front, Momma. They're good-sized, too," Rick said to his mother while she was slicing the bread.

His father confirmed this by nodding his head up and down saying, "Sure do. We're gonna have to get a freezer real soon." He looked out the front window at the line of trout, smiling proudly as he admired the fresh line of fish hanging there that his only son had caught.

David was the proud father of three children, two daughters and a son. The two girls were up in their room where their mother had restricted them until supper time because of a fight they had just gotten into in the kitchen over who could dress out a certain dolly. They were only a year apart in age and it was an almost nightly occurrence for them to fight like two cornered wild cats over one thing or another.

"We gonna have to settle those two down before it gets out of hand again," the father said. "Don't know how much more of this dad-burned bickering I can stand," he said as his fist came down on the table top with a bang.

Janet who had meanwhile crept back down the stairs from the bedroom and had barely cracked open the kitchen door with her tiny little hand peeked through the slight opening, her eyes darting back and forth between the two parents as she looked and listened. "Martha always starts the arguments," she interjected. "I just finish them." At that she grinned "ear to ear" at her daddy, half-looking at him out of the corners of her downcast eyes.

"Oh!" he bellowed out. "Come here, you little wonder, and give

your big ole daddy a hug before he blows up, he's so full of steam tonight. "Hah, hah!"

She ran up to him and he grabbed her up like a toy and squeezed the little fighting wonder with more than enough love in his heart to fill a bucket. "My baby daughter," he uttered into her ear as he gave her one more big squeeze before returning her to the floor.

She immediately climbed up on her high chair, spoon in hand, and was preparing to eat supper sitting next to daddy, but when sister Martha had made her way down the ship-style stairway and then entered the kitchen it was only seconds until she had pulled her high chair up next to daddy on his other "more important" side. It wasn't long before another fight ensued, this one over which one had received the bigger serving. "Momma, she got more than me...!" one of them cried.

David just laughed at times and at others he kept a smile just beneath the surface, ready to bestow upon one of the girls at any given moment.

The family had fresh elk meat for supper, cooked to a tenderness and taste that only wild game meat can have. Corn on the cob and green beans were the side dishes and store-bought ice cream was dipped onto each plate for dessert after the main courses were completely eaten.

After dinner the family retired to the living room area where a fire that Rick had set a few minutes before had heated the room nicely. The two girls played jump rope over in front of the fireplace while Rick and his father and mother chatted over on the couch.

Only books were on the shelves of this family room. The Allen family were Quakers by birth and as a rule much opposed to some of the modern-day conveniences such as radios and television sets although movies were sometimes allowed during the holiday seasons. Rick didn't always agree with his parents' ways. They were hard he thought but he knew that his life was only beginning compared to his parents' lives so if they thought he ought not to do something he obeyed in deference to their maturity. He thought they surely must know best so he seldom challenged their authority.

Rick looked over to the chair where his mother now sat. She was sewing on one of Martha's torn shirts, her head bobbing drowsily at times as she ran the needle in and out through the garment. Rick then

rose to his feet and walked over to the window next to the front door where he could look outside. As he did his father spoke saying, "Open the door, son. Let's get some air." Rick then pulled the door back to a metal latch and returned next to where his father was resting on the couch.

His father was about to doze off but before he did Rick seized his attention with a question that had been burning away at him for sometime as now seemed as good a time as any to lay it out. "Dad," he queried, "do you believe in ghosts?"

The intense manner in which he posed the question aroused a serious look on his father's weather-beaten face. David took a minute to think about what his son had just asked him and said, "Well, son, if you believe they are real then they are as far as I'm concerned." And that was all that was said until sometime later when one of the girls who'd long since fallen asleep on the floor murmured and Rick knew it was time to start carrying the two little princesses up to their room and for him to call it a day.

"Shush!" he mumbled and then began carrying the girls upstairs for the evening, being very careful not to slip on the ship-ladder steps as he toted them up to the strong awaiting arms of their daddy.

Sometime later through his bedroom window that he always left open during the summer months Rick could hear a howling off in the distance of a lost or lone coyote. "Winter will soon be here," he thought, and then he began to drift off into sleep. The stars twinkled high up in the sky and sent their radiant wonder scattering everywhere in the heavens. The boy took one last look up and out through the skylight that opened the heavens up to him each night until his eyelids grew much too heavy to hold open and finally he slept.

Early next morning there was still evidence of the night before out on the horizon as the sun had not yet climbed over the edge of the Mystic. Except for a few clouds the sky was clear for the huge ball of light to start its regular migration from east to west. The first shot of light caught the young man's eyes as he yawned while stretching his body out. Pretty soon he would rise and after he was fully dressed his morning would include setting a fire in the stove down below and then helping out with the daily chore of cooking breakfast.

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The girls were yelling and throwing bacon bits at each other and on the floor as he finished his last bite of breakfast and then swallowed his grape drink with one chug. “Mom, bus is coming,” he said. “I can hear it coming. Better go.” So he grabbed his satchel and ran out the front door pulling a lock of Martha’s hair as he went. She bellowed out, screaming as if he’d done something really horrible to her. “Sorry, Mom,” was the last thing he said before he closed the door behind him and ran for the roadway.

He was running behind schedule and the bus was just whipping around the corner when he reached his stop, panting and clutching his satchel but ready to board. “Screech!” the bus’s brakes sounded, and then the swivel doors opened. There were voices within, children’s voices, which resembled the sounds of a zoo he’d once walked through.

“All aboard!” the driver said and after the motor sounded Rick plodded down the aisle until he found his regular seat next to Johnny Beet Feet.

Johnny had gotten the nickname from his track coach who said that some day he’d make state if he kept up on his practice. The coach was often heard to say, “Boy’s fast, real fast.”

The bus careened through the narrow mountain roads as if a long rail guided the massive piece of machinery. The trail had been cut to a razor’s edge and in places the younger children would scream as though in fear as they played “catastrophe” while looking out the bus windows. In certain spots a long drop no more than a few feet away excited the fearless bunch of travelers making the morning ride to school into more of an adventure than a simple ride to school. It was always exciting for these children of the High Divide.

Rick spoke to Johnny after awhile asking, “Johnny, do you believe in ghosts? I mean, have you ever seen one?”

The youngster scratched his forehead saying, “No! But I believe in them,” and he scribbled in a text book with a pencil. “Yep! I do believe there are ghosts. Why? You seen one?” he asked looking puzzled by the nature of the conversation.

Then Rick said, “My dad said if I think they are real then they probably are so maybe there is something to it all and they really do exist.” Then he went on, “While I’m sleeping I keep seeing a native man

that wants to talk with me and he motions me to come over to him but I never do because I'm afraid. It is frightening in a dream to see and feel what I do. It's so real like. Maybe I should go see what's on the other side where he's at."

"You mean you keep having this same dream over and over again," Johnny asked, "and there is a Mystic Indian man and he signals to you and he wants you to come over and see what he sees?"

"Yes, that's it," Rick replied. "I think he has a stick or something that he wants to show me."

"Oh, man! That makes my hair stand up," Johnny said and turned away to look out the window, perhaps to further consider what his best friend Rick had just told him.

"There is something else, too," Rick said. "Johnny, do you remember when I told you about my Uncle Ned? You know, the old man that lives up around timber line, way up there?" and he pointed with his right arm towards the mountains higher up than they already were.

"Yes, I remember. What about him?" he asked.

"Well, Uncle Ned often times speaks of a Mystic Indian family that comes to visit him up there. He says they are spirits that never completely made it to the other side so sometimes they come to see him, either because they get lonely or because they may have a "reckoning" for the one who sees them. People have often thought Uncle Ned to be crazy but he's always seemed all right to me. My dad has really enjoyed the times he's spent up in the mountain timber levels with him over the past years and he says he is all right, I mean, not insane. He says Uncle Ned don't like it down here. He says if he gets below ten thousand feet elevation he has problems breathing and the hunting 'ain't no good either'. My father only sees him once a year, about this time of year, right after the first good snowfall. Dad likes to snow mobile up there and usually he takes some supplies up for him. You see, Uncle Ned made it big during his younger years as a guitar player and he just dropped out of society after that, banking his money, and now he lives quite well off of it. My father says he's written hundreds of novels and has them stacked on a shelf up there at his cabin and only his visitors are allowed to read them--no one else living, that is." Just as he'd said all this to Johnny the bus turned into the parking area of the high school

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where Rick and his friend would spend most of the day studying and learning new things about the world and its ways and forgetting all about Uncle Ned and their conversation for now.

The day passed quickly for Rick and the bus ride back to the estate was uneventful. All the children were somewhat fatigued from the day's regimen of school and gym. Rick was tired, too, and must have dozed off because suddenly before he realized it the bus's brakes awoke him with a "screech" and the accordion doors opened for everyone to pile off, and then the bus quickly pulled off leaving a big cloud of dust for Rick to walk through as he made his way up the walkway to his front door. Opening it he went inside and immediately sat down to relax upon the living room sofa. Both parents were still at work and the two girls were being attended by a neighborhood pre-school so he knew he would have the house all to himself until early in the evening.

"Think I'll read a book," he mumbled to himself as he grabbed a novel from the book shelf. Not long after that his eyelids grew heavy and he fell comfortably asleep. The book he'd once held up above his face had fallen down onto his chest and his arms were now at his side. On the surface he was the picture of restfulness. Something, however, was continually at work on his subconscious mind and a new wrinkle above his eyebrow was starting to emerge. It was a slight change, not yet obvious, but it was there just the same.

Suddenly the door slammed penetrating Rick's unconscious state and he awoke to the sound of his two sisters bickering off in the distance and his mother stocking the kitchen shelves with new groceries and things. Realizing that his mother had just brought in the last load when the sound of the door being closed startled him Rick asked, "Mom, why didn't you get me up? I'd have carried those groceries in for you."

"Oh, Rick," she responded. "You looked tired today. Supper will be ready pretty soon," she said and went on filing things away. "Your dad will be home before you know it. He had a lay over. What are you doing tomorrow, son?" she then asked. "Your dad has to go out and cut firewood for this winter and he'll need some help, I think. You'd better talk with him tonight...Okay?" she asked before leaving the kitchen for another room of the house.

Cutting firewood was one of Rick's favorite things to do. He loved running a chain saw and it was quite a challenge to bring one of those "humongous" Douglas fir trees down. Strangely enough, doing so brought him a certain amount of pride yet there was an undercurrent of regret that also filled his mind every time one came tumbling down to the ground in a tremendous fall. Thinking about it now brought mixed feelings to the boy and he couldn't quite come to grips with what it was that he felt every time he thought about it. He knew that the family needed the wood for the heat it provided them but still something inside him sensed a loss and his basic love for Mother Nature and the planet was challenged even then, or so he sometimes thought. The people of the Estate had taught him conservation and he was still trying to understand it in many ways, some of which he couldn't fully explain.

Sometime later his father arrived home and after checking in with Rick's mother headed out to the tool shed motioning Rick to follow him. When he stepped inside the tool shed he straightaway pulled out an old chain saw. It was "Old Reliable", an old relic with no visible name brand on it because the tag had worn down to nothing but the old machine had somehow managed to work like a charm over the many winter seasons that the family had experienced up in the highlands. "Boy, come look at this," he said and then showed Rick a dull tooth on the saw. "You see," he said as he pushed the file across the length of the blade, "you don't ever need to pull the file towards you. It's all push." Rick took the file in his hand and pretty soon he had the teeth of the saw looking razor-sharp. He worked from upon the table top, oiling and doing regular maintenance upon some other old reliable machines as well that were lying around the shed. His father now standing outside commented, "That machine's older'n you are, boy. Treat it easy. We'll need that tomorrow when we go to the cut to get our wood," he said and then turned and went into the house leaving Rick to clean and finish up in the tool shed as darkness now began to creep everywhere around.

Rick finally retired his file and tools to the tool bin where they were normally kept for storage. On this moonless night it was much too difficult for him to see well enough to continue working so he decided to head back to the house. The only light he had to guide him was that which escaped from the house's long slanted windows barely

illuminating the backyard as he stumbled over the shadowy countryside leaving his chores behind for a fine tasting supper that most certainly awaited him.

The hours of the evening limped forward while everyone enjoyed the warmth of a burning fireplace and shared in the peacefulness of country-style living. It was such a relaxing evening that everyone decided to retire early and so the night time hours expired comfortably while everyone slept and a new morning soon began.

“Varoom, varoom,” was the first thing Rick heard the next morning. Before wiping the sleep out of his eyes he jumped out of bed and looked out of his bedroom window where he saw his father standing out by the long pole trailer motioning to him. “Come on, come on,” he signaled with one arm while hanging the chain saw down with his other as if it belonged on his hand. “We got some timber to cut, boy,” he yelled to Rick from outside the casement window. “Come on, come on,” and then he walked over to the truck so as to make a final inspection of all the utilities he had in the truck before their departure.

Rick, half-dressed and pulling the rest of his work clothes behind him that he had gathered as quickly as he could, made it out of the front door in a flash. His father restarted the old truck that was still cold from the evening as Rick threw his work clothes onto the seat and then climbed in. David revved the motor once and then again and then finally the old truck and pole trailer rumbled out of the front yard leaving behind a trail of white smoke and dust as it departed.

The dirt road was bumpy and full of potholes but the old International farm truck plowed forward into them anyway. The old machine barely carried the men slightly ahead of its trailing sound which echoed and filtered throughout the valley that was encompassed by richly treed steep hills. Leaving behind the sounds of metal rubbing metal the truck finally reached pavement. When they made a right-hand turn onto a black top road the trailer mostly followed except that one of its tires jumped off the road into the ditch right above a steep incline as the trailer was being pulled around the corner. This caused only a momentary delay in their journey because after one backward glance Rick’s father pushed the accelerator to the floor saying to Rick, “It’ll make it, it’ll make it,” and sure enough at that moment the wheel of the

light pole trailer popped out of the ditch and back onto the road.

“We’re going down to Jake’s to get our wood,” Rick’s father then said. “He’s got a fresh cut goin’ and the price is really good for this time of year. You know Jake’s son, don’t you? Let me see. What’s his name?”

“Ernie. Ernie’s his name,” Rick responded and then nothing more was said until the truck came rolling up to another dirt road. This time it swung wide and turned left and then down for sometime until finally there was an opening in the forest. It was the cut.

The government in the area had taken control of the forests and had practically stopped all illegal cutting in the national forests but this area being private property was completely open and a sign near the cut stated: “OPEN CUT TO FENCE LINE—CUT AT YOUR OWN RISK.”

From this particular spot one could see for many miles and there was a far off bunch of white-capped mountains that lay stretched out due west, and just in between there was a large flat area called the High Plains that could be seen clearly from where the men were beginning to settle in before starting to cut.

Once David had selected a favorable area for cutting he steered his truck expertly forwards and backwards until the tailgate was neatly positioned in a place where the Douglas fir logs could be hand-rolled up underneath and later loaded using a pulley and an A-frame style iron contraption, one that Jake’s father had helped his sons design and build some years earlier. It wasn’t pretty but the thing worked quite well and probably had saved many older men their precious backs.

After the truck was parked Rick and his father jumped out of the vehicle but both had to pause for a moment to look out towards the sheer beauty of the High Plains landscape before beginning to do their work. As they stood there looking out towards the landscape David pointed out towards the view saying, “Flat as far as the eye can see and still that ain’t far enough to see where I was born. Someday, son, I’ll take you to my old stomping grounds. There is a lot up there that you will have to see for yourself. Words cannot fully describe a lot of things in life or places for that matter and there are certain things that just cannot be explained to much degree anyhow. Then he grabbed up his

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chain saw and headed out for a leading edge of the cut. Not long after that the sounds of chain saw motors running wildly vibrated through the valleys below as felled Douglas fir trees lay flat, yielding evidence of mankind's cleverness with the machine and his inventions.

Rick and his father took down a total of six big trees that day which fell with great thunderous thumps and everything that lay beneath the logs was either crushed or displaced. The two men, father and son, sat atop one of the logs near the truck and reminisced about some of the things they'd done while cutting trees down this year, and time wore on and on. "I'm tired," Rick said, and then dropped off to sleep while his father did the same, both of them lying down now and leaning their heads against the log as if they'd both seen a day like this many times before and logging was a day-to-day chore instead of a seasonal event.

While the two slept, curled up against the support of one of the tremendous firs, an old blue pick-up truck with its engine turned off silently rolled down the hill from above. The unexpected sound of gravel being crushed with great intensity penetrated into the sleeping boy's mind and his initial thought was that one of the fallen timbers was barreling down the hill towards them. At this jolting thought Rick woke up with a start, just about jumping out of his coveralls yelling, "Get up, get up!" until he saw Jake's old truck and then finally figured it all out.

Jake had brought Old Plug his pet mule who Rick thought was perhaps the stubbornest of any animal he'd ever dreamed could exist. Old Plug had one weakness that made him manageable and that was a liking for chocolate bars.

"Come on, Old Plug," Jake spoke from in back of the trailer. At first there was no motion, only silence, and then for a moment the sound of a paper wrapper being undone could be heard, then some chewing sounds and out the mule came still chewing on a mouthful of chocolate but walking backwards until the trailer gate was shut. Then Old Plug was led over to a log where he was tied by the harness with a long thick length of rope.

"We got six today," Rick's father yelled out loud from behind Jake as he'd been late getting up from his nap time. "I see you brought Old Plug. Thank you, Jake. He's your strongest, ain't he? He sure looks big," David said while patting the animal's hairy old neck. Then he

moved over to the other side of the mule that remained motionless and looked tired already. The man then patted the mule's left front shoulder when all at once the mule lifted his front hoof up into the air and brought it down with a "smack", right on top of David's boot. The mule then turned his big head around and watched the two hundred pound man squirm and beg for help from the other men in the area.

Jake ran around and grabbed the rope that was attached to the harness and pulled on it but only wasted his energy because Old Plug wasn't going anywhere quick. "Not on your life!" the mule must have been thinking as Jake leaned into the rope. Pretty soon after the men had tried everything they could think of, there was one last resource, chocolate--chocolate with almonds mixed in. That had to be it. Jake stood a couple of feet ahead of the mule and unwrapped a candy bar somewhat slowly. This did the trick and Ole Plug turned his head while cranking his lip towards Jake and then he suddenly set a quick pace over to him and once there quickly began to eat the candy from his hand. While still chewing the chocolate bar the stubborn mule very quickly turned his rear end around to get a good shot at David and with lightning speed thrust his rear hoof back, luckily just missing the poor man's head, after which David ran over to the truck and quickly pulled the right boot off his foot all the while cussing and complaining and then saying over and over again how he'd like to kill that awful animal.

"One man down, three more to go," must have been the way that stubborn old mule looked at things because the whole day was filled with turmoil as he seemed to get meaner and meaner. Jake and Ernie as well had sore ribs because Old Plug would kick out with no warning whatsoever. It was more than an automatic response. The mule was just plain mean and if he could catch someone close enough behind he would simply kick the daylights out of him. He was so mean that by the end of the day he had just about given poor Jake a nervous breakdown from trying to handle the belligerent animal all day. Finally, however, the trailer was loaded with timber and secured for the trip back to the cabin with no one having been killed or seriously wounded.

"So long," Rick and David said to Jake and Ernie as both trucks began moving out of the cut area.

Jake then yelled out of his truck window, "Gonna put that Old Plug

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out to pasture next year! If he'll let me, that is," then he laughed as he watched David pull his truck and trailer forward and up the dirt road leaving only the smell of unburned gasoline vapors behind.

"Varoom!" Both trucks pulled out in single file heading for the highway. David and Rick laughed almost all the way home over the details of the day. They couldn't wait to get home so they could tell the family about their day out in the woods with Jake and Old Plug the mule.

The girls were playing out in the yard when David and Rick were nearing home and as the pickup turned off of the pavement a couple of hundred yards away the girls recognized the sound of it coming. Both of them ran up into the driveway entrance and danced around the area in excitement at the prospect of seeing the big monster logs that the men would be bringing home. Mother was standing on a wooden threshold that was the first step to the porch. Even she was somewhat excited and she smiled and carried on as she called the little girls back up to the safety of the house as the truck and trailer rolled into the driveway. The familiar sound of metal squeaking and groaning under the weight of the timber logs panned out as the load of several tons was backed up to the log storage area where the trailer was to be dumped using a lever-controlled side dump that had previously been built into the trailer.

The men waved at the women folk after slamming the truck doors and then both of them walked to the trailer where they undid the straps that held the logs secure. Finally Rick said, "Ready, Dad?" Upon David's signal the young mountain man pulled the long arm of the side dump down and away all of the logs rolled over to one side.

"Pretty good," his father said.

They stood there for a few moments admiring the fruit of their day's labor and then David said to Rick, "Son, after supper we got to talk. Meet you down by the lake around eight o'clock. Okay?"

"Okay," Rick responded.

After that Rick and his father went inside the A-frame homestead and over supper told the family all about their adventurous day. Sounds of laughter filled the evening as various details were somewhat exaggerated by both of the men. After supper when the laughter subsided and gave way to the sound of dishes being scrubbed and pots

clanging together a spirit of good cheer and a sense of well-being filled everyone and peacefulness pervaded the household as Mother finished up in the kitchen.

David was so relaxed and contented he probably would have sat there for yet another hour but he had just noticed that the hands of the kitchen clock were approaching eight o'clock so he slowly began to rise from the table. "Goin' down to the lake for awhile," he said to his wife as he pushed his chair up to the table. "See you when I get back, honey."

At these words his wife smiled at him encouragingly and asked, "You gonna tell him?" David then nodded his head and exited through the front door somewhat reluctantly.

On his way down to the lake David reflected upon a night many years before when two souls had been brought together, one of them an orphaned child and the other his adopting father. On that momentous evening one of them unknowingly had assumed a given life, the other knowingly had accepted his blessed destiny. As he drew closer to the lake where he knew Rick would be fishing and perhaps waiting on him he did not hurry but instead walked slowly while letting his mind reflect back to the life-changing event that had transpired. He recalled with exact detail how his brother Ned had arranged a secret meeting and given instructions for him to come to a place nearby one of the banks of this same lake and there had handed the child over to him. It was Ned's only child. Ned had named the boy after their great uncle Richard Zirconia Allen. The memory of that night was so strong in his mind even now that he could almost hear the tearful words his brother had spoken to him: "His mother's died of pneumonia. I can't keep him up there in the elevations, and if I came down here to live, you know there'd be trouble. Take him, brother, and call him your own son." He had then turned away saying, "I love you both," and then disappeared into the darkness of the forest.

Equally clear in David's memory now was the look on his wife's face when he had strolled through the front door that night carrying a six-month-old baby and had tried to explain to the woman that his brother had "up and given him the child flat-out." He remembered her disbelief as she had kept saying to him over and over, "Such things just

don't happen," and then how some months later it had finally worn into her mind that the child was indeed for their keeping and there would be no taking the child away. In a single moment of time David and his wife had been thrust into parenthood. It warmed his heart to think of the way parenthood had forever changed his and his wife's outlook on life and other aspects of their life experience as well. Both David and his wife had previously been dead-set against bringing children into such a corrupt world but in a single moment's time their way of looking at things had completely changed.

David realized that his mind had drifted off course for awhile but as he paused for a little longer to stare at the face of the magnificent snow-capped mountain illuminated by the full moon up above his mind came back to reality and he began to focus his thoughts on the task before him. How in the world was he going to explain to Rick that high up there on that mountain was where he was born into this world and that his real mother was a Mystic Indian native who had died soon after his birth and that his real father had brought him here and turned him over to be raised by his younger brother? Should he just say, "Ned is your real father," or should he break it to him a little at a time? As he stood there motionless in the crisp cool air of the night he finally decided that a little at a time was probably best. "I'll tell him slowly," he kept reassuring himself to gain confidence. "Slowly."

Soon David reached the lake's edge where Rick was sitting and he announced himself to the silhouette.

"Yeah, it's me," Rick responded. "Come on over and set down on the log, but watch out. That rock under the log will sometimes cause it to buckle like a seesaw."

So David went over and grabbed a seat and then said, "Son, you're two years ahead in your school studies. They advanced you because you're extra smart. And you know that's a mighty good thing because it gives us more time for fishing and other adventures."

"Yeah," the young man said. "I know."

Then David said, "I've been storing things up in the attic. I've collected enough supplies for a long winter season up in the elevations, way above timber line. There's equipment and other things in there as well and come the first big snow I'm taking it all up to where the road

ends, the place where I meet Ned every year. I want you to come along with me and then I want you to spend the winter up there with my brother Ned. It'll be good for you. And there's something I haven't told you ever and I want you to listen closely." The man's voice trembled as he began to reveal to the young man the truth about his father's identity. "Believe me," he said, "this was not easy for me to tell but you know I had to tell you sometime or another and I believe this is the right time." David then threw a rock into the lake and sat there silently awaiting Rick's response.

After a very long time Rick finally broke the silence saying how it was all right and how he'd often wondered why there were no pictures of him as a newborn in the family album. He said that he had kind of suspected something but hadn't wanted to upset his mother by asking questions. Then he said, "It's all right. You'll always be 'father' to me," and he hugged David reassuringly and spoke of it no more that evening. The walk home together that night under the pale October moon was not a time for words but rather for feelings and thought,-- David, on the one hand experiencing the peace of a great burden having been lifted forever from his shoulders and Rick on the other feeling a little confused but not hurt by the truth that had been revealed to him.

After that night weeks passed and during that time the two men could oftentimes be found upstairs in the attic getting together all their winter gear such as snowshoes, socks, long underwear and all the necessities for that first deep snow. Outside, also, there was still plenty of work to be done before their journey. Some of the wood had to be chopped or split and all of it had to be stacked and covered with a tarpaulin. All this kept the men plenty busy and finally one night while everyone in the cabin slept the snowfall they'd been waiting for came.

That morning when the two men arose at daybreak and beheld the thick blanket of snow that had fallen overnight they could hardly believe their eyes. It was not fully daylight yet but they both agreed there surely had to be at least two feet of snow out there. Just to make absolutely sure their sleepy eyes weren't deceiving them the two of them threw on their winter coats and boots and headed out to the shed together so they could get a reading from the yardstick they'd built onto the shed years before. As soon as they saw that the snow came up to the 30-inch mark

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they were both so amazed that they started milling around in wonderment still wiping the sleep from their eyes.

It took an hour or two longer than they had expected for them to finish getting ready but after a hearty breakfast they loaded the snow mobile and trailer full of supplies and then after a lengthy session of hugging and squeezing by the ladies of the family the two men were off and heading for the mountain range that had so often aroused their curiosities, each man in his own separate way.

“Varoom!”....David wound the engine of the snow mobile up with the accelerator pedal pushed down as he and his son sprawled themselves upon the sled contraption. Rick hung onto all parts of the iron sled for dear life as the antiquated piece of machinery plowed forward into the fresh new snow. The suspension systems underneath the older models such as this one left a person wanting for better shocks but in spite of that this old machine plowed through the snow and stayed its course, pulling like a small locomotive against the weight of the two men riding and the weight of all the gear.

David yelled back to Rick, “This is a strong old machine. She’s rickety and don’t look the best, but she’s got a heart somewhere in that big conglomeration of bolts, sure enough,” he said, reassuring himself and not expecting a response out of the young man because of the noise that the old snow mobile was making as it struggled up the incline of the mountain.

They crossed through the steel-wire fence which marked the beginning of the national forest. On the fence hung a sign which said: “NO POACHING”—which both men knew was not meant to be taken lightly. If a person were caught shooting a wild animal without a permit the fine would be stiff and impartial so in this area, at least, poaching was almost unheard of and if it did happen it would almost surely turn out to be an out-of-towner. The trees numbered in the thousands and Rick stopped counting them as he held on to the snowmobile’s rails that were part of the iron works that held the trailer together. His hands were warmly wrapped in wool glove inserts, thick in leather, the outer layer water-proofed with mink oil and saddle soap and he squeezed both of them tightly onto the railings, especially when the trailer would take an erratic turn.

David had steered the snow mobile often enough before and had become quite skillful at it. He was doing a fine job. At times he would stick to the ravines following the deer trails and would carefully choose his pathways. Other times he would stick to the mountain tops where in most places the trail would be clear with trees only sparsely situated leaving plenty of room for the two weary travelers to journey through the forest's interior. But even though in some places the pace was very much slowed with long and dreary moments, perhaps barely down to a turtle's pace, it was still easier than walking and the young man held on firmly to the trailer as the man whom he'd always known as Father steered the machine ever deeper into the depths of the timber leaving only two track lines in the snow as evidence that someone had passed there since the snow had fallen the night before.

It was beginning to get dark and both men felt somewhat weary from the ride what with all the shaking around and such. Rick was very happy to hear the sound of the snow mobile's motor slowing and then finally winding down to a slow uninterrupted idling. David spoke, "We're setting camp. You think this place will do?" he asked as he stepped off of the machine and looked around.

Rick then pulled the hood of his coat up and then back behind his head to look around. "Let's see," he said. "No big mountain in the east so we don't get confused about what time it is when we wake up..., a creek within walking distance..., and no avalanche danger. Yeah, Dad, let's camp." So the two men began setting up the evening's camp site by pulling grub and hardware from their packs as needed. Just before the warm sun dropped beneath the horizon and darkness overcame the sky Rick had the energy to set a fire and once the last sliver of light shot over the edge of the planet a good-sized fire lit up the area.

"Good enough," David said to him as he was digging out the area where he intended on setting up the tents and had glanced over his shoulder at the warm fire that was leaping into the air and shooting pieces of red half-burned cinder ash on top of the fluffy white snow that had survived the full day of sunshine. It wasn't long afterwards that both men sat around the campfire, each holding a long piece of stick wood in one hand with a cherry red chunk of beef skewered to one end that was sizzling and cooking to a rich golden brown inside the red hot

flames that danced near their feet.

The northern wind chewed at the linings of their jackets and winter wear but the seams held unyielding. Each man took special care not to allow a single tear or nick that might later turn into a huge hole. Out here in the cold western territory good warm clothing was imperative. There was no time to draw on a thread and needle, much less the patience to stand half undressed in the cold for a long enough time to make repairs.

“That wind is cold, ain’t it?” Rick said as he shivered inside of his jacket, concealing it from the older man by dropping his head down onto his chest.

“Yep! A little cold tonight,” David replied. And soon after that the wind carried with it at first a small sprinkling of snowflakes and as the men finished their evening meal the wind slowed but the flakes thickened and began to pile up higher and higher. Before the fire died that night there was a healthy layer of new snow that drifted all around the tents’ walls. When the two men had retired for the night, both of them curled up and comfortable inside their thick, warm sleeping bags David called out to Rick saying, “Think we’ll have to tunnel out in the morning?”

To this Rick jovially responded, “It’s okay if it does! I have my shovel handy.”

Soon after that the cold took its inevitable toll on both men’s bodies and, snowbound or not, they were both snoring away loudly beneath the strong winter front which by morning had dropped several feet of snow, and if it hadn’t been for the heights of their mountain-style tents they would have been completely snow-buried before the break of morning’s first light.

Throughout the night the wind tore at the soft and loosely condensed white puffy snow. The cold air that was exhaled from the northern province down onto the Great Lakes and further over the Montana High Divide became icy cold by the time it reached Colorado and full of energetic swirls that lifted layers of snowflakes and carried them up into the heights of the Douglas fir trees turning them white.

In spite of the wind wild creatures of the forest, some small, others not so small, were drawn into the area by the small patches of grass and

other forms of high altitude undergrowth. Seeking nourishment they walked through that night like lost children in a misty Halloween gloom.

From a shadow of the forest a white-tailed deer staggered against the wind onto the scene and touched noses with the chrome hood ornament at the front of the snow mobile. Overcoming his fears he began sniffing away at the food that was packed away within the canvas that covered the trailer in the rear part of the convoy. The deer's meal of the day might have been no more than a couple of meager handfuls of frozen grass, or maybe a few pine cone bundles that lay protected underneath the overhang of some of the pines. The deer was in a weak and sickly state, probably not strong enough to make it through the hours of the night and certainly not strong enough to tear the canvas away from the protected food, so it swayed and staggered towards an opening in the forest where there was nothing but an old, almost petrified, pine tree. The fallen tree afforded a moment's comfort to the suffering deer by providing some shelter from the chill of the blistering cold winter's wind. The wealth of the planet and all of its natural resources were not in accumulation nearly enough to restore the animal's health. The end of life was near. Death came knocking on the door quickly for the deer and was delivered to the yearling through the stealth of a pack of extremely large coyotes. The coyotes brought the animal to the ground and gnawed away at its throat, killing it within seconds of their initial attack. This seemed to be nature's way of sparing a weary soul undue pain and torture. The six enormous coyotes circled and pulled on the carcass with their razor-sharp teeth until a large area around one of nature's fallen was colored with blood and pieces of torn flesh lay steaming on top of the snow in the pale moonlight that beamed down from the heavens above.

A yearling coyote still shedding the remnants of his silvery puppy coat sat off at a distance away from the feast and turned his nose up towards the bright starlight in the heavens and released a long drawn-out wail, his voice carrying for long distances throughout the forest's interior. His voice seemed to say, "A soul cries for freedom. Its ability to withstand the cold has long since passed. One of nature's children has fallen and we the pack of the very strong have come to deliver it home." Soon after that another and another joined in until each one in

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the chorus of the many coyotes sent forth his very own eulogy for the eternal spirit that they had just sent forth.

After the howling stopped there was a short fight between two of the elders in the pack and then as quickly as they had appeared into the clearing they also disappeared into the darkness and shadows of the forest. The body of the deer mostly eaten, its flesh torn at every end, the meat mostly removed and consumed, would serve to provide the gallant coyotes with enough energy to survive another day in the bitter cold. Thus, the gauntlet of life was carried on to the coyotes from the flesh of the slaughtered deer. Nature leaves no loose ends.

The separation between light and darkness was growing thin as the eastern horizon began to brighten up from the rising sun. The sounds of the two men stirring from their sleep filtered throughout the valley as they mumbled to one another.

“Did you hear that growling last night, Dad?” Rick asked of his father.

“Yes,” David responded. “I think it was coyotes.”

“Did you get up and look?” Rick queried.

“No, it was too cold,” David replied, “and besides, it’s their world out there. They should be able to do what comes natural to them without the interference of outsiders.”

Later in the morning Rick arose before his father and set a warm fire for the men to sit by. He warmed his hands over it while his father crawled out of the down-filled sleeping bag in which he’d slept. “It’s warm by the fire, Dad. Come on, let’s get going,” the young man said to his grumpy father who knocked a pile of snow from the slit in the tent that served as the tent’s door and then came crawling out and finally up onto his feet.

Rick had the coffee going and had used the clean fresh layer of snow that had fallen in the night, melting several handfuls of the soft powder in the hot kettle until it was full enough to provide the two men with several cups.

“Ah! The sweet smell of ground coffee perking away in the morning time makes me feel so good,” David declared to his son as he grabbed an aluminum fold-out chair from the trailer and then sat on top of it near the blazing fire. “We got a long ways to go yet,” he said. “It’ll be close

to sundown when we make it to the trail's head. That is, if we don't have any delays today."

Pretty soon after breakfast and after everything had been loaded and secured onto the trailer both men kicked snow into the fire and then stomped it out the rest of the way with their feet. Immediately afterwards they had to cool their burning feet in the depths of a snow bank. Then they were ready to travel and the engine of the snow mobile revved up to a crescendo of piston noise as the older man warmed it up for the next leg of their trip. Rick boarded the long iron trailer and sitting on top of the canvas that covered their supplies he readied himself for the long ride that would take him up into the elevations where the air would be thinner and a more biting cold.

"Varoom!" The machine and its trailer jumped forward straining the men's muscles as they struggled to straighten themselves upward.

"You ready?" David called back to Rick.

"Yep! Let's go," he responded and away the convoy went up onto a ridge and into the thickness of the forest. Only the echo of the grinding motor remained in the valley that had afforded the men a peaceful night's rest.

The snow was plenty deep and it provided a thick cushion for the skis of the snow machine to proceed as it pulled the traveling party upwards higher and higher until timberline of the mountain range came into view and the convoy came to a halt. "Look!" David said, pointing as he spoke. "Look at the snow," and as he looked where his father pointed Rick could see that the snow was deep in most places, perhaps as much as six feet. Then David went on, "Son, this is it. We're not driving the snow mobile any further." And as David turned the machine steering it back towards the campsite it became apparent to Rick that he and his father would soon part company.

He felt a sudden surge of emotion which he quickly covered up. He grabbed the ties that held the canvas wrapping in which all of his supplies were secured. He reminded himself that his dad wanted him to spend the winter up here with Ned because somehow he thought it was so very important and so he gathered his resolve to do this without whining like a child. What he wanted most was for his dad to be proud of him so he decided he was going to have to "stick it out" like a man.

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He looked around the area and the bright sunlight burned away at his pupils. He grabbed a pair of sunglasses from the satchel that he'd recovered from the bundle that lay in the trailer and put them squarely on his face. They immediately fell down from the bridge of his nose toward its tip as they were too large and in need of adjustment. Rick then reached down grabbing a bag of clothes and asked, "Think I'll need all this stuff?"

"Yes, you better believe it," David answered. "Where you're going there are no convenience stores to go buy what you need. Up there running short on something is part of life. Get used to it!"

Rick sensed an air of abrasiveness in his father's attitude that he quickly discerned was not emanating from the man but merely passing through him. The boy knew it was time for him to toughen up. The years of the cradle had long since passed and the time to be a man in the eyes of his father had finally come so with the strong muscles in his arms he grabbed the bags one at a time piling them high on top of one another and said nothing.

That day as the hours of the morning passed David had made lunch for the two of them and now he laid out two thick sandwiches atop the snow machine. He quickly made up some kool-aid from the silvery snow they'd carried up from the campsite that had been thawing as they had traveled in the afternoon sunshine. While they were eating David said to Rick, "Son, after lunch I'm going to leave you here. My brother Ned will be along directly. There are two rifles in the brown-colored nylon bag and the ammo is packed right next to them. I would stay longer but I have to go to work very early tomorrow morning and I must make it down the trail and back home before dark." So the boy and his father bid each other farewell and after a little while there was only one traveler aboard the snow vehicle which was heading down the pathway towards the estates below.

Rick would never admit this to anyone but the sight of his father on the snow machine disappearing down the snow trail without him left him with a deep sense of loneliness that began to mount into panic at which he actually cried out, "I'm alone up here. I'm alone!" and then started screaming and chasing the retreating snow mobile. If David had happened to look back he would have stopped, of course, but he didn't

look back and the racing motor of the machine blocked out the sounds of the young man and before Rick had run twenty feet the rear end of the trailer disappeared over a hilltop ridge, gone forever, or at least until the spring of next year would come around. The despairing young man knelt on one knee and while holding his hands up to his face cried for a little while, the child still part of him, but after awhile his crying gave way to the realization that it took more to be a strong man than just long hard words. He thought to himself that to be a man meant knowing oneself and after awhile he wiped the tears from his eyes and accepted that he would stay up at timberline for the winter season, that is, if Ned showed up.

Evening crept onto the landscape like a mountain cat stalking its prey, silently and painstakingly as could be for the lonely young man. He sat by the blazing red fire he'd made with extra wood on standby as assurance that he'd be able to see into the darkness later on that night. There was little need, however, because there was a full moon that lit up the countryside on that calm late October evening. With a clear star-filled sky it was almost a gift. It seemed that the heavens deemed it to be that way. Not a sound was to be heard off in the wilderness and this peacefulness gave the young man a much needed sense of composure and confidence on his first solitary night out in the wild. After a hearty meal of packaged meat and boiled potatoes he crawled off to the confines of his tent and into the warmth of his down-filled sleeping gear.

"Ah, it's heaven up here," he thought aloud, breaking the solemnity of his solitude. What he did not know was that most people who spend much of their time alone usually speak to themselves or to some animal in order to provide themselves with a sense of companionship and many of the old Western characters portrayed in books and such, or so it had been said, would even carry on long conversations with an unknowing animal such as a pack mule or donkey.

Rick pulled the covers over his head and soon fell into a deep, deep sleep, the kind that happens when one is completely alone and partly apprehensive, too tired to worry, and maybe a bit overly courageous in ignoring the potential dangers that might have been lurking about. The wind gently pushed at the center of his tent and pulled it against the strength of the thin rope that held the pole upright from both sides. No

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danger came to the solemnity of the valley that night, only the tossing and turning of the young man experiencing a nightmare or two, nothing more.

The next morning came and while cooking breakfast Rick heard a noise overhead and when he looked up to see the cause something came up behind him. As he turned around he saw a man coming toward him. It was Uncle Ned!

“How ya doin’, boy?” he asked, and then the large stocky man walked over and gave Rick a big hug and a squeeze and then said, “You gonna stay the winter with me? You know it’s cold up here. You gonna have to adjust.”

“Oh, I’m tough,” Rick responded, “and I’ve lived in the winters down below all my natural born. It ain’t that rough, is it?”

Then the old man replied, “We’ll see, boy, we’ll see. Well, get your snowshoes together, and make sure that you lace them up good to your others cause they will more than likely come loose in the higher drifts, a dumpin’ you one leg cock-eyed in this deep snow up here, and that’s no way to be, boy, no way to be.” Then he pointed up to near the top of the peak where there was not much living timber or otherwise and said, “Up and over that mountain is where we need to be afore the sun falls from the sky today, and if we push hard, we’ll make it. If not, then we’ll spend the night sleeping with our backs to the northern winds and our eyes set on the stars of the southern skies.”

Rick thought to himself after looking up at the peak that there was not a chance in the world that the two of them could make the summit and over the top of it by evening, even if they had a snow machine, much less on foot, and the young man stood aside with his lip hanging down.

The old man laughed and patted him on the shoulder saying, “You haven’t spent much time with me, son. I’m a kidder.” Then he walked into the tree line and disappeared. Shortly thereafter he returned leading two donkeys by their leashes and he pointed towards one of them saying, “Rick, this one’s for you.”

Rick looked and beheld one of the friendliest looking donkeys he’d ever seen in his life and he patted it on the forehead saying all the while, “Nice donkey. Nice boy!”

Ned broke in, "It's not a donkey donkey. It's a wild prairie burro, boy! Ya know, there's a big difference, let me tell you." At this Rick stepped back a little but then the old man restored some confidence to him saying, "These prairie burras are much friendlier to us humans so don't let them buffalo ya, boy. They's just burras," and he began tying onto the backs of the young-looking animals the supplies that Rick and his dad had brought up the night before. "Yep!" he said as he tied the last knot, "We got a ways to go, young-un, so let's git a-goin!" And Rick who had also loaded his gear on his burro's back pulled on the leather leash and he and the burro convoyed on the trail of the seasoned mountain man.

There was a clear-cut trail to follow that the man had taken coming down and was now following again because no snow had fallen on it since. Rick tried to reason why Ned took certain departures and abandoned others. Some were for obvious reasons, others were not, he thought as he brought up the rear of the convoy.

"You doin' all right back there?" the old man asked.

"Yes, I'm fine, Uncle Ned," he said. "I'm fine."

When he had first learned he was coming to the heights for a winter season Rick had at first been somewhat apprehensive at the thought of it and wasn't sure that the idea agreed with him but now he could see that things might not be so wrong, and considering the way he had been feeling over the past two days he thought maybe he could actually enjoy this situation. Since he'd come out on this trek it seemed that he was always out in the open, free, and there was no sense of containment as in the small village which was full of walls and rules, do's and don'ts. He thought that, given some time, he might even like the solitude up here in the heights of Colorado.

Rick called up ahead to his uncle, "How'd you teach these mules,...I mean, burras, to walk on snowshoes like they are doing? It seems so effortless for them."

Ned yelled back, "Tell you when we get home," and never turning or losing a step he held the convoy to a constant pace, all in an effort not to lose time because he figured Rick had already experienced a cold night and one more evening should be all the youngster should have to endure.

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A few hours later the two stopped for a brief lunch and as soon as they were back on the trail snow began to fall and was slowly covering up the trail that Ned had made that morning. Feeling a little concerned that they might possibly become lost the boy kept asking, “Ned, can you see the trail okay?”

Ned finally explained to him that he was more than familiar with the terrain saying, “Boy, I’ve traveled these parts ten times the fingers you’ve got on your hands, and if my eyes failed me I’d still beat ya home, so don’t be a frettin’ no more, okay? Just don’t be a worryin’, ya hear?”

They’d made it quite a ways that day and Ned figured that one short day after that was all that was needed to make it to the warmth of his cabin. “One more day, boy, then you’ll see my little piece of heaven,” he said to Rick as they sat that night with blankets wrapped around them in front of a blazing fire, sipping some soup that the old man had brought down inside his saddle bag and had kept from freezing inside a thermos container.

Rick spoke up, “This is good. What’d you call it, uncle?”

Ned smiled saying, “Split pea, beef, and noodle soup, with a twist of cooking brandy mixed in on the sly. You really like it?” he asked.

“Yep! I think it’s tasty! You won’t see me throwing any of it out, I guarantee you,” the youngster said and then smiled back across the fire that had now taken to jumping around violently. The wind was picking up and the weather was taking a turn for the worse so both of them decided it was bedtime and bid each other good night as they retired to their warm snuggly sleeping bags as the bitter cold and powerful wind became too much for them to handle. The burros were tied nearby and covered with large coyote coats so as to keep them warm and dry against the wetness of the snow that was being carried to and fro by the freezing wind.

“Nee-hah, nee-hah,” sometimes they’d bellow out as a typhoon-level wind would lift the coyote coats from their backs. “Nee-hah, nee-hah.”

Later that night a thick wall of fog crawled across the ground in fronts, or so it seemed, because no sooner than a single wall of fog passed through the area another was right behind it. The summit that lay just north of where the camp had been set was totally invisible,

hidden behind a wall of puffy cloud material that was moist to the touch and breathable.

From the wall of clouds came a bolt of fire that shook the snow loose from the long spindly limbs of the tree tops of the pine tree forest, and from the energy that was expelled by the lightning out walked a young Mystic Native man, perhaps in his upper teens, probably very close to Rick in age and size. He was covered in animal skins and wrapped to his shoulders in a buffalo hide that looked warmer than a modern-day jacket would be on a cold winter's night. In his arms he carried a yearling deer. The arrow that had put the animal to its last breath was still lodged within it and dangled off to one side as he laid the carcass before the almost depleted camp fire that the two travelers had warmed up next to earlier in the evening. Once the deer offering had been laid at the fire side the young Mystic Native hunter took a long spear from down by his side and plunged it deep into the snow and cold ground and then turned to where the last flicker of the fire remained in the fire pit. He danced and chanted some "Mystic Native" words over the red hot cinders and then turned and disappeared back into the thick, puffy clouds that boiled over the mountain area. Nothing remained except a strange smell very similar to that of burning sulphur and a peculiar feeling that a solitary hair strand could stand up vertical all on its own.

Not a coyote or weasel came near the camp site that night and the only sound that could be heard was the occasional "whoot" of a white-eared owl perched far off and higher up the incline of the forest that lay awaiting the arrival of the oncoming travelers.

CHAPTER 2

When the eastern province of the sky turned from dark red into a light blue and the clouds formed into layers of blue and snowy white a cool breeze came in from the north and shook the canvas tents as though they were sails on a ship adrift on the high seas. Sounds of a human awakening from slumber issued from one of the tents into the area surrounding the campsite as Ned stirred inside his sleeping bag, yawning and stretching in an effort to get up and start a new day.

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Shortly after that the front flap of the tent swung open and out came one of Ned's large dark leather boots and then the other, and after some yawning and coughing Ned managed to pull himself the rest of the way out of the tent and arose to a standing position. He stretched the sleep out of his arms and legs before going to the nearby standing of trees where he collected small unbroken twigs and dried pine cones for the morning fire which he was busy starting when Rick came out of the other tent. The young man looked much like a wild man that had been released onto the countryside, his nearly short cut hair standing up in all directions and his eyes squinting because he had not yet removed the morning sleepers from them.

"Comb your hair, son," the old man said. "You look like a wild donkey I once saw in a rodeo back down in Texas some years ago. Hah!" That started the morning off with a little laughter.

Breakfast was cooking and the warmth of the fire relaxed the young man so he decided to take over the cooking and let Ned attend to the other morning details that had to be taken care of. Rick stirred the eggs and bacon slices every time they would start to stick to the pan. "You sleep good last night, Uncle Ned?" he asked.

"Yeah! Surely did. Good as a lark," the old man replied. "We should make it to the cabin, I reckon, by mid-afternoon today, maybe even afore afternoon if we get things together and get ourselves to moving."

The two, both hungry and weakened by the element of the cold, then ate the meal with relish. "Somehow," Rick said, "up here in the thin air with the cold and everything, a simple piece of bacon really tastes good. Much better than at the lower elevations."

Ned agreed and smiled saying, "You're gonna make a fine mountain man. These people up here are really gonna like you, son."

"What!" Rick responded. "What people?" he asked, surprised and somewhat taken aback.

"You mean David has never told you about the mountain people? I thought..." and then Ned said nothing more.

"No!" Rick replied. "He just said that he wanted me to come on up to the highlands and spend some time up here with you. That's all."

Ned looked a bit disturbed and didn't comment any further on the

matter but grabbed up the dirty pots and pans from the smouldering fire and threw them into a snow bank, and after they'd steamed for awhile grabbed some gravel and used it to clean the cookware by pushing a cloth rag around inside with the gravel underneath. "It works good as soap," the old man said, "if you put a little elbow grease in with it." Then he walked over to the green duffle bag and tossed the stuff into it. Once things were fully packed and the burros fed and then loaded the two men walked around the camp site and looked around to make sure they were leaving nothing behind.

Rick was quick to learn and had been taught well by the people of the Estate about conservation and how to maintain the national forest and park lands. The idea of littering up the forest or upsetting the subtle intricacies of nature by leaving something as simple as a green bean can was just something he couldn't do and he always took it upon himself to be very careful about litter and to police up after himself or the traveling party. Rick knew even human waste had to be buried.

"Nee-haw, nee-haw," the thicker furred and larger of the two burros sounded off, his tail wagging from side to side after the pair's snowshoes had been fitted and tied. The animal was ready for a long walk and Ned could tell the burro felt feisty that morning.

He gave it an extra rub between the eyes before pulling on the reins saying, "Let's go, boy. Let's go," and the occasional "clack" that sounded when two of the burro's snowshoes met was the only sound that broke the silence as the traveling party was once again forging upwards through the thick and thin layers of snow and ice.

They followed an invisible trail that morning, one that only Ned could see. He led his snowshoed burro over the varying depths of snow with the surefootedness of a mountain goat, knowing just which piles of snow would support the combined weights of burro and man. As he followed along Rick thought to himself that his uncle's mind must surely house every trail and passageway in these heights for this was an undertaking far too dangerous for anyone but a seasoned mountain man, and then only if he were intimately familiar with the terrain. Without this familiarity a man and a burro could unknowingly walk upon a ravine full to the top with snow and could plunge to their deaths.

"We're up above timber line now, Rick. This snow is deep," Ned

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suddenly announced. "In some places you could sink down into it more than twenty feet so lengthen the leash on your burro behind you and follow close on my trail. Don't sidestep me, whatever you do, or they'll be diggin' us out with meat hooks in the spring. Trust me, son, and everything will turn out all right." After Ned said all this he sensed the young man's uneasiness every time one of his legs would fall through the snow finding no bottom where there normally should have been ground but the old man would soothe his nerves every time by saying, "Don't worry. I've crossed this a hundred times. Get your leg out of that hole and let's git these burros a goin' again. Forward, forward, and don't look back cause if you do then you'll have problems a movin' forward."

As the convoy crept up the cap of ice and snow that held fast to the gusset of the mountain a strong gust of wind would sometimes travel down the mountain side so quickly and with such force that it would dig into the packed snow sending clouds of snowflakes scurrying into the air, and as the men forged their trail finally up and over the crest of the higher mountain a large chunk of ice went tearing through the area where the convoy had just passed startling the two men.

"Did you see that?" Rick cried out from underneath his parka hood.

"Yeah!" Ned exclaimed in equal amazement. "Would have killed us dead, sure enough!"

Rick still shuddering then said, "We'd have surely been dead, and frozen like a TV dinner."

After wiping some frozen ice from his curly gray mustache Ned spoke again saying, "Let's get on. I've about had my excitement for the day. We only got about thirty minutes or so and we're home free. It's warm at the cabin," he said while looking over the flatness at the crest of the huge mountain. Then he pointed with his arm saying, "Look over there. You see that big area that's got nothing growing on top of it? Well, that's my fishin' lake. And look up above it," he said pointing up a hundred or so feet. "Well, that's my cabin. You see it, Rick?"

"Yeah, sure do," Rick answered. "Sure do," he said as he stood with his mouth agape. "It's beautiful...just beautiful!" The young man thought to himself that he had never in all his natural-born days seen anything as beautiful and picturesque as what was now before him. The

lake must have been at least a quarter-mile to each side and was surrounded by massive shelves of granite rock protrusions that could have been called cliffs, only up here they were known as “the shelves” because that was the name the old man had given them.

“Well,” Ned said, “let’s get these carcasses a-movin’,” and he pulled at the rein on his burro getting his attention and away both of them went towards the lake and large rock outcropping that Ned held in the cross hairs of his mind. “Gonna be warm up there, you hairy young critter,” he said to the friendly burro that had carried his winter supplies over a terrain so rugged that he had once thought no one would ever attempt crossing, especially him, and he looked up into the cloud-covered sky and thanked the good Lord for making his journey safe up and over the deadliest side of the mountain.

It was cold, bitter cold, as the wind whipped around them upon the rippled surface of the mountain top but it occurred to Rick that one might be able to leap from one peak to another, given the right atmospheric conditions of course, and the journey would be slight, involving only a little bit of leg work to get over to a nearby peak where there would be a different panorama. Rick thought to himself that they would have to save that adventure for another day because today the puffy clouds churned on an axis and would sometimes leave a window, but not often enough for such an endeavor.

While all these thoughts were going through Rick’s mind the travelers had continued moving their convoy closer to the cabin on this the last leg of their journey and soon thereafter Rick happened to look up and discovered that from his vantage point he could see the stone chimney of Uncle Ned’s cabin only feet away. The cabin sat high overlooking the lake’s shore from around twenty feet above and aside from having the front porch and deck supported by a pair of peeled Douglas fir log posts and other cross members the rest of the house had been built into an incredible looking rock edifice at the rear. The edifice had been created by thousands of years of water drainage flow and seasonal snow run-off. At this modern-day time the run-off water was delivered to the beautiful crystal lake that lay below and then was carried even further down by some small man-made drainage tiles and clay pipes that eventually led to a series of small beaver ponds. The

homestead was a very attractive log cabin with clay chinking that filled the space between each irregular surface of each log. Its roof had been constructed in a similar manner and then covered by big bundles of straw flattened out to form a single layer that was anchored by rocks strong enough to hold it against the wind.

Rick was extremely impressed by what he saw but even more impressed knowing that his uncle had single-handedly built the cabin with only the help of two stocky Southern-bred mules. Rick remembered this from hearing his dad tell the family about it so many times over the years. It had taken Uncle Ned almost two years to build the cabin. He had been forced to work around the cold season which had meant leaving the cabin half-done one of the years. The part of the story that particularly stood out in Rick's memory was that when Ned had returned the second year to finish the cabin he had found that a large black bear had made the log structure his home. Just how Uncle Ned had gotten the bear to move out Rick did not know but according to David's story Old Blacky as the animal was called to this day can still be heard milling around the area, digging in the trash and looking for food. He'd never crossed Ned although their paths often intersected. Old Blacky had seemingly developed some sort of kinship with the man and respected his ways. Rick thought to himself that he would have to ask Ned if Old Blacky still frequented the area and what might be his chances of catching a glimpse of the big feller. Maybe some day he'd see Old Blacky grubbing around, perhaps on a hillside somewhere, turning over a dried log or two that had been subject to the unending decay of nature or the on-going process of ant destruction over time.

Anyhow, after finally reaching the tying post that was held together with large railroad stakes at both ends Rick reined both burros securely. The afternoon was calm and the air was crisp and light. Suddenly Rick thought to himself that one could more than likely hear a pin drop from a mile away. He paused for a moment, taking a deep breath of the clean, crisp, fresh air into his lungs. He couldn't help but gaze around just to fully appreciate the place's magnificent beauty.

"Come on in," Ned yelled from the deck above to the young man that was still lingering down below. The front door suddenly opened with a "swoosh" that seemed to carry for a great distance everywhere.

Next the hanging bell clanged as Ned shook the screen door. He was trying to prop it open with a piece of stick wood that he'd recently found that had remained from an earlier firewood cut.

As Rick walked up the rock steps and finally onto the deck landing he envisioned the effort that Ned must have put forth to load those humongous logs up so high onto each other. He also wondered how rocks of such magnitude could have been placed on the rooftop or even displaced by a single human man. "Surely they must have already been part of the edifice wall and then somehow maneuvered down," he thought as he walked the perimeter of the deck.

"Hey, Rick, let's get a fire started. We'll have some lunch and then we can talk, okay? I'm beginning to get a chill inside me," he said as if he were so tired that probably all he wanted to do was lie down on top of the living room couch in front of the big picture window and rest the remainder of the afternoon out. "See that pile of wood?" he asked. "Get us a fire a-goin' and I'll cook lunch. I just want to rest my tired old bones here on the couch for awhile while the place heats up." Not more than a few minutes had passed till he began snoring away while Rick set the fire using pine cones and dried fir bark for kindling. After warming his feet to the red hot cinders that burned away in the chimney fire box it wasn't long before Rick had a place on the other end of the couch and was holding up his end of the snoring. Both of them slept through the rest of the day and aside from Ned rousing up long enough to fetch up blankets for the two of them nothing went on except for a lot of loud boisterous snoring.

Meanwhile about a mile further north daily activities were going on at another small cabin situated at about the same elevation as Ned's cabin. This other cabin also sat at the very top of a mountain and was built up into a large rock outcropping in such a way that allowed the snow to build up, out, and around its outside perimeter but not high up against the foundation of the cabin. This meant that in order for the occupants to get snowed in the snow would have to reach about thirty feet deep which even up at these elevations was rare.

Smoke was pouring out of the chimney of the nearby homestead and the sounds of a person working out in the yard and those of a young kid, perhaps no more than five years old, running out in the confines of his

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yard could be heard. The young woman was in her late teens and a widow to a local hillbilly man that had in his lifetime become heir to a small fortune and become property owner of the mountain on which she now lived. Ned had helped her late husband build the house which now provided the widow sanctuary from the elements and she and Ned had been good friends from the time she was born and raised up in the highlands of the Rockies.

This young woman was very special to Ned. She had never ventured down from the heights and seldom any further than the village down below. She had received home school education in her early years although she had never graduated from high school. Darla was the homemaker type of girl with enough mental fortitude to appreciate what she had and was not one to venture out looking for trouble to get into because she knew full well that life is what you make of it. A country girl through and through she was the sort that could make honey out of plain sugar if she set her mind to it. Her young son, bright and healthy, was the young woman's pride and joy and she watched over him like a hawk, day and night. The youngster had a strong line of conception, one that had generations of mountain dwellers behind it and once the boy came into manhood he would have many kinfolks to call upon if necessary.

The young woman named Darla called from the other end of the yard to her son, "You come over here, boy, or I'll let that mean ole bear have a shot at yer hide. Come here, come here," she bellowed like an old goat mother would call to her kid from a distance. Then the boy ran over and said something mischievous to her at which she ran him into the cabin, hot on his heels, slamming the front door behind them as they entered, knocking loose a little clump of the clay chinking that had been used to fill the cracks between the logs during the cabin's initial construction. The living room window shook a bit, also showing signs that it needed some attention.

The woman was much too proud to call upon one of the child's uncles or his grandfather for handy repair jobs, preferring to leave things in somewhat of a disorder, having faith that God would provide, and in a lot of ways the Great Father did because she had many callers that came from all parts of the countryside and they'd usually volunteer their

time as handicrafters. Even so it seemed never to be enough as there was always something else that needed fixing. Up that high in the mountains there were no hardware stores around the corner or even grocery stores. There were no roads, only hard-to-travel trails that were almost impassable during the harsh winter months, especially for a mother with a child, and if something were broken you'd either fix it with what you had or leave it be until a miracle happened, and believe it or not, miracles usually did happen for her and the young boy.

When the sky changed face that evening the dim and slightly visible moon became vividly bright. The early hours of the evening had already passed finding Rick and Ned devouring their hot and tasty dinner. Rick spoke while chewing a large portion of elk steak that was still in his mouth. "I seen evidence of other people up here, Ned. Are there many other people living up here like us as well?"

"Yes!" Ned confided, "but they don't take much to outsiders," he said and then took a long draw from his coffee cup. "And believe it or not there's women up here that need husbands but they don't want to get married and then run down to the city like some dad-burned city slicker bunch. Most of our girls are country bumpkins and they can shoot straighter than any man I've ever seen. You better believe it, boy," he declared.

Rick sat there silently for a moment not knowing how to take the old man's boldness and the confident way he was speaking and then replied, "I didn't ask about no women, anyhow," and he snickered at Ned until they both broke out laughing.

Later Ned announced, "Well, I'm getting tired again. It's about time to go get some more rest over by the fire." Then he said as he rose to his feet, "If you want to talk you'd better get it over early because I'm not waiting around for anybody. That soft couch and warm fire is enough to take the fight out of any man no matter who he is," and then he walked over to the fireplace, stoked it up, and climbed onto the couch for the evening and sat there with his bare feet laid out, warming them to the flames.

Rick then came over, plopped his feet up on a log that had been cut precisely for that purpose, and commenced questioning the old man about the mountain people. Ned then began telling him a very long

story: “The Scottish Highlanders were the first outsiders to settle here,” he said. “A large party of them came here to escape society and its rules and for the mountain way of life. This particular area is full of their heirs. Most of the children around have a Scottish line behind them and there is one ascension known as the Allens that has really filled the area over the years. One thing that’s kind of interesting is that the further west that you get up here the stranger their language becomes. It’s a cross between Old English and New Western and it’s the old that I can’t quite comprehend,” the old man stated as he shook his head from side to side. “And our neighbor,” he said, pointing with his arm extended out towards the north, “is called Darla Thompson.” He then paused in his speech for a moment, long enough to make his point very clear, after which he loosened up and said, “She’s been like a daughter to me ever since she’s been knee high to a grasshopper, and if you court her boy, I’m telling’ you, you’d better have plenty of respect, because she’s got kinship all over these mountains and if you was ever caught a-slipping’ up, well, shotgun marriages ain’t uncommon up here, believe me. And furthermore,” he then went on to say, “if I sent you home next spring a married man, well, your father would half kill me, now, wouldn’t he?”

Rick looked down at the fire that was burning close to his feet while he thought over the things that Ned had said to him and then replied, “Don’t worry, Uncle Ned. I’m not that way. And, anyhow, I ain’t so sure that I want to leave this place for some time yet. You say that they got education up here and they got supply runs that are just like having a store around. Everything is very different here, but a lot of it is just about the same, too,” he said, referring to snow mobiles, gasoline, food, clothes, and on and on.

“Okay!” his Uncle Ned broke in and then went on to explain how no more settlers could come up into the highlands, stating boldly, “The government has seen to that! Yes,” he declared, “none of this land can be bought or sold. Only the initial owners or their descendants have rights to it. The initial owners were a bunch of settlers that early on laid claim to large acreage parcels before the lands could be put up for sale or declared to be national forest property. Yes, sir!” he said almost mockingly, “all the land there is as far as the eye can see is the parcels that were laid claim to long ago and otherwise only national forest in

every direction--and out here there's no such thing as rent or bills to pay. Son, you either make it or you don't, that's it! And one thing's for sure," he said, "if you don't like your neighbors then you'd better not worry about it because there ain't nothing you can do about it anyhow unless you want to get shot. And how'd that old saying go? 'An eye for an eye'? Well, that means not plucking the first eye. And, anyway, most folk up here got better things to do than be messin' in other peoples' business, but there's a few..." and then he grew silent, almost as if he'd just had a memory of an incident he'd had somewhere in his past. "Yes! There are a few people you'll need to know about," he said as he kicked his old leather boot across the room, "and I'll tell you about them later but right now I'm beat tired and I'm going to get some sleep," he muttered as he dove at the mattress that lay atop the wooden floor boards, barely catching it underneath him as he descended from a standing position. "See you in the morning, Rick!"

The firelight from the fireplace was the only light source in the cabin that night because every lantern in the place had intentionally been left out in the rear porch atop a barrel full of kerosene. "We only need firelight up here," Rick remembered hearing his uncle say earlier in the day.

Perched on the couch just above where his uncle lay sleeping Rick ruffled the blankets that had lain at his feet a little earlier and pulled them up over him as he readied himself for a good night's sleep. The rickety old couch was plenty soft and comfortable to Rick's travel-weary muscles.

Coming up to the highlands in a very short period of time had made both men's bodies sore and tired from the change in elevation. The ailment common to mountain travelers called elevation sickness had to some degree set in on both men's bodies. Breathing fresh air over a good night's sleep would be enough to cure both men of their fatigue.

Rick slept like a log that night and was amazed at how alive he felt the next morning. Not only had plenty of strength returned to his physical body but his mind felt completely renewed after the night of deep unconscious sleep afforded him by this Eden-like place. Perhaps his youth was also working in his favor because the surge of energy he felt as he rose to his feet was so great that he quickly forgot his

exhaustion from the night before.

After he'd dressed and had mostly eaten the breakfast that Ned had cooked and then laid out on the counter for him Rick heard a gun sounding off in the distance followed by utter silence. Before he could throw his coat around his shoulders, in came Uncle Ned carrying two North American geese by their webbed feet. He was holding them up and looking at them in the doorway and smiling but not saying a single word. He tossed them onto the front landing and then yelled, "Rick, come here! Come over here!"

He took the young man down to the marsh area that lay out behind the cabin and showed him a doorway that was framed in with some extremely heavy timber. The timber seemed to hold back the rock that lay above and around all sides of it. He pulled hard on the thick timbered door and it came open. As he stepped towards the rear he took a couple of deep breaths and then exhaled them as if he were testing the air for something. He then stepped partly inside and began fumbling around for a lantern which he found quickly. "Come on in," he said. "Come in and see."

Rick stepped into the doorway where there was a large pool of bubbling hot water that was trapped by rocks and a man-made bed of straw and clay. The hot water then fed another larger reservoir to the rear and finally ran into an overflow tube made out of cedar wood. It all then emptied into the rear of the cavern which was a long, deep miners' tunnel that had been abandoned many years before. The young man's eyes grew large and he almost jumped out of his suspenders. He reacted to the sight of all this by running around the pool of steaming hot water inspecting everything about it and asking when he might be allowed to soak for awhile inside of it.

"Oh, yeah!" he said. "Uncle, you know this has got to be the best time of my life. Since I've been up here life just really seems to be a miracle."

"Oh, yeah!" Ned said in good cheer and they both laughed.

Uncle Ned then explained to Rick how the idea of building the hot springs had come to him. One day many years before Ned had been roaming around his backyard when he discovered what looked to be the entrance to a miners' tunnel. Deciding that he wanted to investigate this

further he had gone and got his lantern. “I’d been standing in one particular spot near the opening,” he said, “because I wanted to light my lantern before going in. While I was doing that I happened to notice a wet spot on my boot. I reached down and felt the ground and found it to be warm and wet. That was when I started digging, and sometime later, once I got deeper into the hole, water really started coming out quickly, so I got the idea and you’re looking at it. A hot springs in my own backyard. Yee haw!” Just talking about how his hot springs had come into being filled him with excitement and he danced a gleeful jig around the hot bubbling water. Then he said, “I got some dinner guests coming over tonight and we’ll all take a dip. Okay?”

“Okay,” was the agreement before they slammed the large door shut and returned to the house.

Once inside the two men retreated to the confines of Ned’s kitchen and living room. When Rick had first arrived at the cabin the previous day he had been so involved with setting the fire and then plying Uncle Ned with questions about the neighboring mountain folk that he really hadn’t taken the time to examine the house’s interior design. As he looked at it now he saw that the walls were made of age-old pine, most certainly taken from the forest just outside Ned’s cabin door. The pine wood had been cut into boards, further prepared with tongue and groove cuttings, then finally end-notched for a nice overlay at each end. The large mantel, also cut from age-old pine, settled above the ruby red brick opening that so often held a thundering fire within it. It was adorned with pictures that had been box-framed by the lonely architect some years before during a much different time.

“Uncle Ned, tell me more about these mountain folk and the things that I should know about everybody up here. What I’m wondering about is whether people up here are like so many of the people in the village down below who talk about other people as if their own lives were totally without blemish. It seems they want to get into everybody else’s business. Is it like that up here?” he asked.

“Well,” Ned proclaimed to Rick, “you’re gonna get that everywhere no matter where you go or how far away you get. There’s always gonna be somebody lurking around trying to spy on you and seeing into your personal affairs.”

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Once again the old man seemed to be using “beat around the bush” tactics to avoid giving the young man the specific information he wanted about the locals. Ned felt that a proper young man’s life should go forward on its own allowing for new friends and a fresh clean destiny, not one littered with his personal age-old prejudices. Such things should not be allowed to influence an aspiring youth’s decisions on how or with whom to make his friendships, or courtships as well.

Finally, the young man boldly confronted the old man’s evasiveness and asked him outright, “Who are your friends and who are your enemies?...”

“Well,” Ned sat back and looked at Rick square in the eyes and then said, “there’s one thing you gotta learn about these mountains, and that is, you make your own friends, and you make your own enemies.”

“Okay, I understand what you’re saying,” Rick said even though he hadn’t received a direct answer from his so-called uncle. He realized that an indirect response was about all that he was going to get for now even though he might squeeze something out of him later, and besides that a part of him had to agree with what the old guy had said. He could also see that he’d probably been given some wisdom that he might have to learn more about later from life itself. “One more question,” he continued on even more curiously than before, “and then I’ll stop, Uncle,” he said while staring him in the eye, as if watching for a single eyebrow to flinch. “Why are the wild dogs up here not coyotes? They are wolves, cause I seen one this morning. He was watching you from a distance while you were coming back from hunting. He was big as a full-grown St. Bernard and he didn’t seem to be much afraid of you either cause your back was turned and he surely could have taken you out if he’d been interested in that sort of thing!”

Ned leaned back in his chair and grabbed a piece of chewing tobacco which he put into his mouth and then he said, “Well..., we got a few neighbors around this area, and I hope you understand that this is just between ourselves, okay?...”

“Yeah, okay, Uncle Ned.”

“Well, boy,” he started out, talking as if someone had tied a knot in his upper lip. “They’s some folks around here that firmly believe in conservation and things, plus a lot more of them that feel that the wolf

has been mistreated, and over-hunted. “My goodness!” he said before spitting his mouthful of chewing tobacco into a bucket very near his leg. “Less than two hundred years ago the wolf numbered in the millions on this continent and now there are only hundreds living in the wild--and they’re completely at the mercy of mankind.”

Ned then stood up and walked over by the fire that was burning vigorously inside the fire box and said to Rick, “There’s something else that I want to tell you.” Then he confessed, “Yes, I’m one of those men who’s been breeding the wolf mix, and I’m darned proud of myself. I’ve managed about thirty young cubs and now I’m proud to say that they are living good lives,—safe and happy in the freedom of our forest lands. But they could have a problem if word got out because there are ranchers around here who are already unnecessarily trying to eradicate the wolf from our countryside because according to them they are killing too many newborns and sickly ones from the cattle herds. Even though this has been proven to be a fallacy sheep herders as well are saying about the same thing, or maybe even worse. Truth is, government money has a lot to do with it, and always has for as long as I can remember,” he said and then quieted down for awhile catching up on his breath. Finally he started up again saying, “Do you want to see one of the hybrids?”

Shortly afterwards both men strolled out behind the cabin, once again a distance to the rear where there was an old beat-up shed that had chicken wire ten feet high around it with one single gate that was used as the only entrance. Ned then yelled, “Come out, Momma. Come out!” and pretty soon a large extremely wild-looking wolf mix came out from behind the shed and started pacing back and forth all along the entire length of the wire fence from corner to corner. She seemed to be looking for some way to get herself and her cubs out and away from the two invaders.

Ned then said, “Darla’s coming over later on tonight for one last look and then the wolf momma and her cubs are going to be set free tomorrow. This has been mainly Darla’s project, you know. She really has taken an interest in them. Well, anyway, we have to hand-carry the young ones about ten miles north of here where a primary pack has been holed up for sometime now. There aren’t any unfriendly ranchers up

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there and some other mother and cubs have already been set free there. They seem to be doing pretty good up in those parts so we decided to go ahead and release this bunch out there as well. Do you want to go along?"

"Oh, yes," Rick replied. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Well, anyhow," Ned went on. "All of us will have to camp out a week or so to make sure that the mother takes to the cubs out in the wilderness. Sometimes such close contact with human kind will estrange the mother from her cubs and she could abandon them because she might be confused and hyperactive. Watch her. See how she paces from corner to corner at high speed? That's only her nerves acting up. She's actually a very warm and loving mother out in the wilderness but more than one season locked up in this over-sized chicken pen and she wouldn't be good for anything but skinning. Her nerves would go and then her mind would soon follow. Wild animals simply must have their freedom. To take one of God's creatures and cage it up like that is against everything that I believe in but it seems that for every wrong there must be two rights done."

"I've seen enough," Rick declared. He felt very weak in the stomach because watching a wild animal trapped like that didn't set well with him either. Ned threw Momma some pelletized dog food and then they returned to the house where both of them began preparing the evening meal for themselves and their guests. They also began collecting supplies together from the shelves of the cabin for their journey farther north tomorrow.

The daylight hours dragged on and on for the two men, partly because they were a little over-anxious about the evening "set-down" and partly because they were so full of anticipation over what their passage north on the morrow might entail. Both men managed to keep themselves busy into the early evening hours scrubbing pots and pans, cooking, folding garments, and sharpening buck knives and other instruments that would be vital to a camping outfit. Rick, who seemed to have an endless curiosity about the woman Darla and her young child, bombarded Ned with questions about the woman and her background.

About seven o'clock, just before twilight, and after the two men had done just about everything they could think of to do around the cabin,

they just sat around on the deck landing waiting for their guests to arrive. A short time thereafter the party did arrive. Darla was riding horseback and she also had her young son riding directly in front of her. He was positioned almost on the mane of the tan quarter horse and both mother and son were smiling as they approached the old tie-down log contraption that had been built many years before. It was nothing more than a long skinned pole that had been spread out and made to saddle between two posts that were now deeply embedded into the ground. It was used mainly for tying up horses. Ned and Rick who had been so eagerly awaiting the party's arrival quickly jumped to their feet to greet the two visitors.

"Welcome, welcome," the old man said as he took the horse by the bridle and tied the reins to the hitching pole. "We are really glad to see the two of you tonight. Darla, meet Rick!" Ned went on to say. "He's come up for the winter season and he's a fine young man. He's my nephew from the village down below and my brother is mighty proud of him. Hah! Hah!" and then Ned went on to laugh loudly as Darla dismounted from the tan horse pulling her son down after her.

"Thank you for having us," she said. Then, in good spirits, they all went inside to warm up next to the fireplace and eat the meal that the two men had spent the afternoon preparing.

Afterwards, everyone gravitated to the couch to further relax and digest their supper and also to while away the few remaining evening hours in conversation. It was common practice for mountain folk in these higher regions to entertain each other as few, if any, had televisions or radios since they lived so far away from the reach of most radio and television frequencies. Ned being the most gregarious of the bunch was quick to steer the conversation to praise of Darla. Making sure that Rick was looking on he began by giving the young lady a sentence or two of support.

"You know that I think that you are a courageous young woman to have taken the world on like you have all alone, just you and the boy. I know you have put a lot of your own personal ambitions away and placed them second to the raising of your wonderful son. I feel that you are top notch on the totem pole of life, my dear." Then he said to her while looking her directly in the eye, "I have a present for you and I

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want you to keep it until after I pass away then you can reveal it to the world that in the past has been so hungry for my writings and you and your son will not want for anything after that point.” Ned reached up into the wooden mantel that rested above the fireplace and found a little silver key which opened up a fold-down door and then he reached in and grabbed a manuscript of a book he’d recently written saying, “Keep this and remember that writing was something that I loved to do and dedicated my life to.”

After that he sat back down and talked to her some more and then in a pitch of good humor he spit out a quick story: “Years ago on a rainy day I went out hunting and somehow I became lost and all alone. Sometime later while still seeking my home out I found myself inside a dreamy mountain valley where I quickly realized that somehow I’d walked myself inside a rainbow. Upon realizing what had happened I then began seeking out the bucket that some say lies at the end of the rainbow. It’s been said that the bucket is full of gold and silver trinkets, don’t you know, and if you are lucky enough to find it then you will be rewarded forever by its hidden riches so I began relentlessly searching, all over at first, but eventually as fate would have it I ended up with nothing more than disappointment for my dreams. Somehow I kept looking and looking everywhere for that ancient lock box but after it all I still found nothing above the ground so determined I kept on and started digging handful by handful into the top soil. I kept digging deeper and deeper with my bare hands until at last I hit some softly compacted crushed granite and that’s when I put my boot heel into it and something surfaced. I’d surely found it, I thought. It wasn’t shiny and it wasn’t the gold. The prize that I found was something far greater in value and I understand now that it was even more valuable than all of the gold and silver one could ever find. I’d found a bottle with an inscription still pasted on it and it said, ‘Ray’s Private Reserve-Bottled Whisky-Homemade 1926’. For years I carried the bottle around not knowing what to do with it. I was so confused but I still kept looking for someone that could perhaps tell me what to do with my treasure, and for many years of my life I wandered from place to place until at last one day in a moment of deep thought and despair I finally decided to put the bottle back where I’d found it up in the hills. I buried it deep within the

soil and walked away, never again returning to the place where the rainbow ends, and the moral of that story could be that I'd found alcohol early in life and somehow later on I also learned how to put it away."

At that point the old man stopped to catch his breath and then he quickly grabbed up Darla's son and ruffled up his hair a little bit. After that the two of them began playfully pushing and shoving each other back and forth until pretty soon everyone in the room was involved.

After the laughter died down and everyone seemed to be getting sleepy Ned asked Darla, "Are you staying in the guest room tonight?"

"Yeah," Darla responded. "I guess we'll pitch a bedroll down if you don't mind having us tonight."

As Rick ran to grab some more blankets from the closet he could hear Ned saying to Darla, "We got plenty of miles tomorrow so let's get an early start in the morning."

"Right. Right," was all that she said as she grabbed the blankets from Rick who'd been standing next to the bedroom doorway through which she now passed.

"Good night!" they all called out to one another later on after the bedroom door had been closed and all of the party had settled in for a peaceful evening. Sleep came to them quickly as everyone knew that when the sun did rise above the horizon that there would be plenty to do and energy was something they must dare not run short of.

Over the years Ned's mind had been slowed by the pace of mountain living and his relaxed opinions towards life made the hours of being in the wilderness seem more like an adventure than a hassle to those around him. Rick wondered if there could be an ounce of stress left in the man. Perhaps impatience had been driven out of him by the ruggedly beautiful mountains and all of its elements.

One of the many examples of his uncle's unhurried approach to life that Rick had noticed in the short time he'd been with Ned occurred next morning when the first morning's light sent the shadows and darkness back to the deep and into the bottomless confines of a universal abyss. When Rick arose he looked out and saw the old man standing out on the lake out front churning a hole into the ice with a metal auger he'd received as payment for a deed of trade he'd managed

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some years ago. Then sometime later while Darla and her son were still fast asleep he walked up to the cabin and laid down four good-sized trout that he'd pulled out of the lake and it wasn't long until he'd set a fire in the fireplace and had the lake trout browning inside of a frying pan for breakfast. Darla and the boy smelled the fish cooking and made their way to the kitchen where they both stood looking on at Ned while rubbing the sleep from their eyes.

"Smells good. I'd know the smell of burning trout anywhere," Darla said laughing as she spoke the words to him and spontaneously the boy started laughing also.

The four of them left the mountain top soon afterwards carrying all of their supplies on the backs of the two burros. The men walked in front and the woman and child rode in the saddle of the tan quarter horse. Darla had wrapped the youngster in a waterproof jacket and other thick coat wear so that the boy could barely move his arms backwards and forwards but he was warm and in mother's constant attention which was exactly where he wanted to be.

The wolf cubs were securely enclosed in a wooden orange crate that had been filled with soft things like pillows and cotton blankets. The box hung suspended between two long skinny poles that had been firmly attached to the saddle of Darla's mare so they could be pulled along behind her, warm and well protected from the cold and the snow.

The sun had warmed the air by noon and a person could go without gloves or unbutton the top snap on a jacket without getting a chill. Darla had her jacket completely unbuttoned and so did the young boy who rode hugging the pale leather saddle horn of his mother's saddle like he owned the world and was steering his way through time only daring to take his eyes off of the trail long enough for an occasional glance up at his mom.

"We gonna need to stop pretty soon, Mom."

"Okay, boy!" she said to her son giving him a shake and then a loving squeeze as her body leaned into her loving embrace. Her long red hair fell down onto his face almost covering him completely and after a few paces more the woman pulled the horse to a stop and dismounted with one arm leaving the child in the saddle until she could hoist him up with the other arm once she had her feet firmly placed on

the ground. When the both of them had settled down they looked back for the others but their quarter horse's gait had placed them far ahead of the other two riders. The woman knew that it would be a good ten minutes or so before the men and their burros would come trudging up the mountain side. As Darla's horse had lately picked up a limp she hurried the horse over to a log and dug an egg-shaped marble-sized rock out of the pony's front hoof. Afterwards she took the boy over to the bushes for the bathroom where he could personally "water the lilies". After that the two of them sat down upon the log pondering the whereabouts of the two men and their trailing burro. The wolf mother had meanwhile begun meandering around the area while her four cubs were resting aboard the homemade rickshaw that was still attached to Darla's horse and the boy was starting to play in the dirt in front of his mother.

Darla was resting very comfortably atop the log that she and the boy had so conveniently found. It was in a flat spot that had been cleared by Mother Nature's snows and rains for a very long time. Her position was so comfortable that after awhile her eyes grew heavy and as her breathing began to grow longer and more relaxed her conscious mind took leave of the day and its activities through sleep.

The adventurous child took no time in discovering a large hole that had been covered over with some gravel and other wooden debris for many years. He was digging feverishly as if he'd eyed something of great interest to him. His little hands soon recovered a long wooden stick that had an arrowhead stuck to it on one end and a bunch of long feathers still hanging on to it on the other. Everything had been well tied to the rod with stained leather strips. The child left the pit with the ancient spear still in his possession and returned to where his mother now lay sleeping on top of the ancient pine tree that had succumbed to death many years before.

Soon a strong wind arose that shook the snow loose on top of the tree's long spindly branches carrying the powdery snow up high into the air forcing it to scatter almost everywhere. As the boy looked up into the sky he could feel a wet mist against his flesh and his pale face shivered in the cold wild breeze. Then suddenly out of nowhere a tremendous Mystic Native figure appeared on the scene and stood

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towering over young Darla as she lay sleeping. An instinct opened her eyes and adrenaline instantly surged throughout her whole body as she viewed the ancient person eyeball to eyeball. He looked back at her with eyes of an unnatural darkness. Next he spoke to her in a language that she was sure she'd never heard before. All of a sudden he looked away and began to walk around the area while still waving his spear up and down with his mighty arms that could reach to the heavens. Next the apparent shaman refilled the pit that the youngster had earlier dug out encircling it a couple of times in what looked to be a dancer's trance. Then he came back to both of them and mumbled a few more unknown words. Finally he finished off the dance with a few extra incantations and then turned his back to them and walked away into the forest where he quickly vanished. Darla quickly grabbed up her son and threw him onto the horse. Once she had mounted into the saddle they both hastily cleared out. Sparing not a single second she rode back to where she thought the two men would be coming on. Spotting them instead on another trail way up ahead she dug her spurs into the belly of the mare and soon recovered the distance.

"Thought you'd sneak off and leave us behind, huh? Not a chance, fellers," she said to the men as she rode up from behind maintaining a gallop pace until she regained a position within the group. "You won't believe what we just saw," she told Ned but continued to move her pony forward. "I'll tell you about it later. It's much too complicated to explain now!" He could tell that she was upset but sensed that it wasn't the time to question her. The party continued on for another mile or so until the burros began to grow tired and ornery. They were wonderful pack animals and were as sure-footed as goats but they had their limits like every other creature on Mystic, especially when they were loaded down with the several hundred pounds of camping gear that was to last the party of four ten days or more.

It was getting late in the afternoon anyway for them and the boy was whining at every turn. They'd covered almost ten miles, a substantial amount for one day, so the traveling party decided to pitch camp right where they had just stopped. The spot had good cover, plenty of trees around to break the northern winds but not so dense in that particular area that the tree tops would block out the moonlight at night. There

were plenty of large boulders around the campsite which made nice places to perch on or to have a plate full of browned potatoes or some other delicacy of meal time.

“We got it all,” Ned said to everyone as they sat around the fireside awaiting their portion of the meal to be served up to them. Ned walked around the dinner circle carrying the sizzling pan here and there being careful not to sling any grease on anyone as he forked out a portion to each of the hungry recipients.

The child had crawled between Rick’s legs and lay curled up. He was hugging his knee caps for added warmth against the shipment of cold air that the northerly winds delivered. He was wrapped head to toe in layers of winter wear. His hands were kept warm and dry inside a pair of finely made wool-lined sheepherder’s gloves and his feet stayed equally warm inside a pair of rubber moon boots lined with cloth inserts but his child’s mind told him to be cold so he was. His failure with the evening meal brought the ire of his mother in the form of a slight spanking but his whimpering gave way to laughter as Rick engaged him in a bout of play fighting by throwing rolled up balls of snow at him from the length of the firelight. The sounds of his laughter relaxed the exhausted crew. For Ned who sat propped up against a large brown boulder, his mind taken up by natural instincts of protection and family, the laughter was something akin to a sleeping pill and his eyelids began to drop and flicker until he dropped off to sleep as well.

A sound out in the woods brought the head on one of the relaxed burros to life and it raised its ears and lugged its big head immediately to attention lifting it a foot higher than usual. The other burro followed his lead causing three of the sleeping party of four to stir. There was a howling near by and a coyote wailing somewhere off in the distance, both of which sent the hair on Darla’s neck up on end and the rest of the awakened party’s as well. A twig snapped from somewhere over to the east and before Rick dared rise and investigate the crew found themselves completely surrounded by a pack of large overly nervous wolves. The wolves kept themselves back at some distance but were still close enough to suppress any ideas of escape that anyone might have had. Rick held a long slender stick up in the air and waved it violently above his head towards the growling wolves who began taking

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turns coming in on everyone as if it were a game that they were playing, but hard as they tried the wolves could not separate the crowd from each other or lure the boy away from his mother using the old “cut to gain a clear shot” routine. It might have worked on less intelligent but faster animals like the elk but it usually didn’t work on humans.

The largest and seemingly the most deadly of the snarling beasts was a big black one that stood watching from a distance and seemed to authorize every maneuver that the younger wolves made against the frightened group, expressing his authority over the other wolves by using various postures to which they responded as they milled around outside the lighted shield of the campfire.

Soon the large one ran up to within a few feet of the clustered group and with his head lowered he snarlingly walked right up to a place within leaping distance of them, and with his yellow eyes beaming up at them from his attack position he crouched further down and then leaped at them, completely unafraid of the humans or of what the hot fire could do to him. Rick covered up his face with his coat sleeve and hand preferring to take the animals’s teeth somewhere in the flesh of his arm rather than the tender muscles of his neck and throat area and Darla bent the upper part of her torso over her son so that she could protect the child and turned her back side to the deadly animal as she proceeded. The last thing that she or Rick remembered seeing was the largest animal lunging forward into the nearby blazing fire pit followed by the other snarling wolves. Somehow each of them had disappeared into the inferno as they leaped from the ground and was instantly torn away into the shadows of the dark world leaving no trace of their ever having been in the vicinity.

Not a single wolf hair or paw print was left in the thick snow from the big black wolf or any of the rest of them. This was peculiar and aroused a considerable amount of inquiry from the group as they sat around the campfire later that evening.

“They say that sometimes spirits are thought to take the form of animals. I remember reading that somewhere not too long ago in one of my father’s books back at home,” Rick said to the young mother who was now holding her child in her lap and warming him up by the fire. “Those wolves weren’t real, that’s for sure. No animal can just

disappear or break a lunge in mid-flight like that. It's impossible," he said. "Something strange is going on and I don't like it."

"Well," Darla said, "the wolf mixes are much larger and are naturally going to be stronger and more aggressive but thinking about how those animals disappeared the way they did, you're right. There had to be something supernatural involved. Maybe we came across an old ancient tribal burial ground or something back there." Then she told Rick all about the Mystic Native that had caught her sleeping and then danced around her and the boy while waving a spear up in the air and mumbling words in a language that she did not recognize.

Hearing about this mystified the young man and he slurred his words saying, "What have we stumbled into...?" And he looked up and away into the darkened sky that hid the moon from them further adding to the spookiness of the night.

Darla climbed into her bedroll laying some warm blankets between the cold ground and herself. She pulled the boy in with her and they curled up warmly inside together. She turned out the lantern that had been kept burning the entire evening. A strong cool breeze blew at one side of her tent and pushed the entrance flap around somewhat. It made enough noise outside to arouse the young woman's attention but not enough to get her to rise to her feet and pull it closed. The batch of wolf cubs had migrated into Darla's tent earlier and had stayed warm in there throughout most of the evening but now they were pushing their way underneath her bedroll for additional warmth and one particularly adorable pup was curling up around the boy's chest creating a large warm ball of fur for him to hold and snuggle up against all night.

As Darla lay with her head sunken into the softness of a down-filled pillow her body was motionless but her mind kept recreating what she'd seen that day. She was trying to figure out what the dancing man had been trying to tell her when he was prancing around earlier. Could that really have been an ancient burial ground or some other place that his tribe had considered to be sacred for some reason? And why did he contact her the way that he did? As far as she knew she'd never been anywhere near a sacred burial ground but as time skips through the centuries perhaps so do telltale signs that could have existed a very long time ago. She recalled the spear that her son had found earlier on.

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It had many feathers on it and long strips of painted buffalo hide attached to it as well. Could it have been an ancient burial marker, one that had fallen to the ever changing years? Maybe it had been washed away by the elements until at last it was found by the young boy. But surely uncovering an old spear would not be enough to arouse such powerful spirits and get them moving. There must have been other reasons for the repugnant treatment that had been brought on to her and the others. But what could have brought the apparitions around? About this she could only wonder as the hours of the night time and darkness drifted on until finally she grew tired enough to sleep.

Rick likewise was putting together a few thoughts as he maintained the campfire outside while everyone slept. He sensed a presence or something around him but he wasn't sure what it was. He just knew that sleep was out of the question for right now so he kept throwing more wood into the blaze and warming up to it.

As he sat there for an hour or so longer the pale moon seemed to travel through the blackened clouds like an ancient warrior's arrow might pierce through an early morning fog finally finding its target after some length of travel and as he sat there next to the fire watching the sky in wonderment a scent spread through the area that reminded him of the same experience he'd been through earlier.

Before he could respond Rick was once again surrounded by growling and snarling wolves and his only friend was the small and dying fire that could flicker to nothing very easily if a cool wind picked up. This time an elderly Mystic Native man danced into camp and carried a spear with three feathers on one end of it bound by long strips of buffalo leather with ink writings all over them in small blocks of different shades of white, blue, red and green. The native man was adorned with various colors upon the skin of his face, possibly some kind of ceremonious make-up, painted so that it seemed to exaggerate just one single look that he religiously kept pasted to his face and he danced lifting his knees ever higher up into the air as he circled and chanted loudly in an unfamiliar language.

Rick was now standing with his chin almost resting on top of his chest in fright and amazement while he looked on at the dancing native when suddenly the tribal man rammed his spear into the ground, stood

up and stared at him and then raised his hand and pointed it at Rick and started mumbling again, only this time strangely enough Rick understood what the ancient man was chanting. The words went something like this:

“Once we were strong and mighty but now very few of us remain and our cause is in a state of dissolution and despair. The wolf once was a lowly friend and ally but over time he has taken an evil turn. So as there may only be one single point to a needle so can there be only one solitary hunter that remains and he must consume everything that he perceives and in the end he too will be weak and full of despair because he is not the greatest hunter of all time nor is he the last.”

The parched-faced old man that had danced like a demon and still maintained the solemn look that had been painted on his face faded from sight as he waved his hand at the young man who remained standing motionless as if he were also in a trance although he had all the while been intently listening to the old man who had come and then left with the wind.

Rick then shook his head and looked around. He studied the area. There was nothing, only a quiet darkness that lingered everywhere except for the sky which was very clear and lit with moonlight and far-away stars. Little beams of silver-tipped arrows shot in all directions from each of the stars that encouraged the moon to shine so brightly that night as Rick undressed for no apparent reason and was buck-naked, down to his elementary tattoos, and began running through the snow, barefoot, crying out how he couldn't take it any more and how if another ghost showed up that he was going to do something horrible and downright awful in revenge. Then he took a stick that he'd pulled from the woods and began beating away at the snow and wet ground that lay underneath until finally the stick broke into two pieces, each with an edge on it. Then he struck the ground with them screaming and freeing the top soil as he plunged the sticks deeper and deeper until something emerged.

“It must be a bone fragment or something similar to a human shin bone,” he thought as he kept digging until both hands bled from the rocky dirt he'd thrown over to one side. The young man of only seventeen years was behaving like he'd just lost his mind. The

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paranormal experience he'd just been through and that of the earlier hours seemingly had overcome his young and unprotected mind and after Rick had thrown one handful of soil too many he became weak from exhaustion and passed out in the snow naked and unconscious. His frail human body had no built-in defense against the sub-zero temperatures. He was lying sunken into a thick pile of snow and to make matters worse somewhat of a north wind was building. He would surely be frozen solid by morning if something or someone did not intervene and an early death would be his fate.

All of a sudden there was a howl that came from the area where the young man lay curled up, his body already assuming the fetal position as a freezing man will do, and soon after the howl a large swirling cloud of white powder formed above the dying man. It swirled round and round the campsite and then all at once it disappeared and so did Rick's body along with Darla's and her young son's leaving Ned all alone still sleeping inside his tent oblivious to all the events that had just come to pass.

CHAPTER 3

When the wind whispered to Rick from this new reality something inside his mind listened deeply to its beck and call and the sleeping man began to arouse slightly from a very deep comatose state. Gently and steadily the fabric of a moving wind traveling across his forehead penetrated his subconscious mind until the soft sensation that Mother Mystic provided had stimulated his mind completely and before long he became fully aware of a warm summer breeze. The southern wind had earlier warmed his new body but was now soothing his weary semi-conscious mind as Rick gradually came to a new final level of consciousness. It instantly occurred to him that he had no idea as to what condition his body might be in or of where he had landed or whether he was even alive. "Am I dead now?" he asked himself. "Why is it warm here in this place instead of very cold?" As he opened his eyes wide and began squeezing his hands his other muscles began to

come to life as well. To his surprise his body moved quite well and it wasn't cold here in the least. He then noticed that there was a warm fire down below close to where his feet were so he began watching it while he tried to pull his thoughts together and once again he lay motionless intently thinking.

At that moment something happened that was completely beyond his comprehension and it occurred around the dying camp fire. Whether or not he was actually envisioning the phenomenon he couldn't be certain of one way or another but as he lay there watching the fire at his feet something jumped around the campfire side and at that moment he had the sensation that a person might receive by viewing many millions of rackets and balls popping all around such as on a small special Fourth of July event.

Soon after letting the stars fade from his mind he became fully aware of his surroundings and then after his mind had rested for a while longer he looked out onto a new world. He could see a young woman lying next to him with a child curled up very close to her body and it seemed that somehow during the night her long soft black satin-like hair had fallen over the young innocent boy so as to almost completely cover him. Rick noticed an empty abandoned bedroll on the far side of the woman, one that only the young boy child that now lay next to her could have earlier vacated. He gathered that the kid belonged to her because the youngster had seemingly crashed into her arms sometime during the night. He was now pushing his shoulder blades up against the beautiful looking woman's nose crowding her for more warmth. The two of them were firmly wrapped inside many thick brown blankets that had embroidery running across them that consisted of large lines with "Z's" running through them in the most irregular of ways. There was nothing common about the young girl's appearance as she lay out in the morning sunlight. Her lovely face had very high cheek bones that cast a slight shadow upon her tan skin from the slanted sunlight that beamed from afar onto her velvet soft skin as though nothing could ever be so soft and tender. Her long eyelashes allowed for a much smaller shadow to be draped upon her lovely face with a wonderful flair as she lay sleeping on her back now having rolled over and away from her young kicking child. The young boy had features much like his mother's only his eyes were

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slightly different and it was obvious that his genetic structure possessed some variance to hers and the departure was also quite impressive.

Rick then decided to thoroughly examine his own body to make sure that none of his extremities were frozen because the last previous recollections he had were that he had been very cold. As he felt everywhere on his new body every feature somehow felt different to him. He looked down at his hand and found that it was brown and covered with dirt and then he further glanced up at his arm where he suddenly noticed that his skin color had changed there also even on his biceps. From that observation he concluded that he was now a native instead of a white man. Too afraid to stand upright he preferred to lie there wrapped in his blankets watching his surroundings in the least conspicuous way possible.

There were sounds of all kinds filling the surrounding area, horses whinnying and stomping their feet off in the distance and also some very unfamiliar grunting sounds that carried over the wind from an even greater distance. It occurred to Rick that there must be a large number of buffalo off in the wild making the grunting sounds.

Finally as Rick was beginning to grow tired of lying silent and also of pretending to be so calm inside of his bedroll his interest was suddenly piqued by the stirring of people in the surrounding camp sites. Brand new sounds from a strange brew of unfamiliar people milling around inside their personal campsites traveled through the crisp morning air and fell onto Rick's awaiting ears. All the while the sun steadily crept its way higher and higher above the distant horizon shedding its precious light onto the busy peoples' encampments. There had been a thick fog that had settled into the region overnight but was now making a hasty departure into the oblivion of the atmosphere.

Rick saw that some of the women were carrying single pots full of water and he noticed that they sometimes had to use both of their arms to struggle against the weight of what was inside. Others were toting colorful handmade baskets that were mostly full of green leaf batches some of which had the root bulbs still attached and hanging outside. Suspended from other ladies' necks were inch-wide leather strips of dried hide which connected to other leather straps that had been sewn diagonally onto the buckets making for handles. There was little talking

among the women and the only sounds that could be heard at this moment throughout the area were the short shuffling footsteps of the women as they transported the water from the nearby stream back up to their tepees presumably for their families to use.

At last the woman that lay close to Rick also began to stir and as she did the child also uncurled and began to stretch out his little body underneath the warm blankets. The woman's eyes then opened wide and for a moment Rick thought that she was going to jump up and run away so he stopped her by saying to her, "Hello, Darla. It's me, Rick! Don't move!"

Upon hearing the voice which she somehow recognized to be that of a young man she had once known named Rick she maintained her place in the bedroll without running away but only barely. She was already breathing heavily and sweating in the cool morning air. The words that had settled her for the moment had come from a stranger, someone of whom she had no past recollection. Not knowing anything for certain the young woman's eyes immediately grew very large and wild-looking and then she peered at him and asked, "Who in the world are you?"

The native man hesitantly responded saying, "My real name is Rick and you should have known me from the other side. I've just now begun to get some ideas that might explain how it all happened. Even though I had been thinking while you slept nothing came to me until you started to wake up. What I now feel, or can only theorize about, is that perhaps we were transferred into a parallel universe and somehow the three of us were placed onto another page in the vast dimensions of time. We have been transported into these new bodies and I have somehow become this native man. Tell me," he said, "do you know what has happened to the man's soul whose body I now possess? Has his soul and spirit been transferred into another body? And would you just tell me to make it very clear, was your name by chance Darla in the other world?"

"Yes! Heavens! But how can this be?" she asked.

Some time passed as they stood looking at each other and at their own bodies inspecting them for scars or for places where an accident could have rendered imperfections to their new bodies. Finding neither the woman at last spoke again, "Yes, my name is Darla and this is my

son James. Why has this happened to us? Were you some kind of black magic conjurer or something like that on the other side?"

"No," he answered. "I think that it had something to do with a piece of territory that we were crossing over and that your son dug up a very important hunting spear that belonged to someone of great consequence to these people. Perhaps it belonged to a shaman or a great chieftain," he conjectured.

The woman began to look very despondent and a long wrinkle began to form on her forehead along with other shorter ones that lay above and beneath it. Then she asked almost under her breath, "Rick, will we be like this forever do you think?"

"I don't know," was the only answer that he had for her as he lay back down under the blanket. "I just don't know."

The minutes of the morning moved forward and soon there were native tribe members all about visiting each others' encampments. Some were uprooting everything in their personal campsites while others were pitching in to help friends gather up their tepees, hardware and supplies, just about everything that they could carry on their backs and ponies. Some families had horses and others did not but the women mainly walked around and were usually not allowed to straddle a horse for any length of time.

Pretty soon a friendly looking Mystic Indian came over to Rick and Darla and greeted them as Falling Moon and Peaches and he also asked them, "Why aren't you preparing for the autumn journey? Is there something wrong with your family or have you chosen to eat the dust kicked up from under our ponies' hooves this year by traveling among the ranks of the old and weak of our tribe?"

"No!" Rick retorted. "My family is resting a little extra this time so that we may scatter mud in your tired old face as my family passes your fatigued bunch up!"

"Hah, hah!" the native laughed and patted him on the back saying, "Falling Moon, you're a real kidder," and then he went back to work with his family.

To Rick's amazement he could understand very clearly what the other native man had said to him almost as if it were spoken in English although it was another language entirely. Somehow he could speak and

understand using the language of the Spear People which was apparently universal native slang but the thing he found to be the strangest of all was that he was referred to as Falling Moon by the friendly Mystic Indian and Darla was furthermore called Peaches.

Somehow Rick also knew that the Spear People tribe had been travelers over a very long period of time, if not forever, and that its members had become a collection of most of the continent's stragglers and misfits from all other tribes. Their main language was a combination and included fragments of the languages of all the other tribes.

Some of the other natives seemed to be watching them from a distance probably because they were behaving somewhat differently from the others. Ironically, all the while Rick and Darla were likewise intently watching the other natives and their peculiar ways as they desperately wanted to fit in with the people with whom they'd found themselves to be living.

The morning's events continued on and most of the people were eating as well as packing other goods now in preparation for a journey. A little earlier Rick and Darla had eaten dog meat that one of the fellow women had offered up to them and a chunk of Mystic Indian cheese that had been allowed to cure from inside the belly of an aging buffalo carcass. Their new bodies were much in need of nourishment as the transformation had depleted energy from their systems and they were beginning to hunger for more and more food. As they looked around now there was none to be found, only scraps of dried buffalo hide that the community dogs were chewing away at in a vacated campsite.

There were only a few tepees left standing now. Only bedrolls still lay out around small piles of rocks that would contain fires later on in the evening. It was apparent that the tribe would stay another night in this place but was preparing to leave for a long journey. There were one or more long spears stuck in the ground at each fireside and on each one there were feathers and strands of buffalo hide hanging. Rick somehow knew that each individual spear was an indicator of ownership and that anything in an area so marked must not be tampered without the consequence of retribution from the owner of the spear. Somehow just as he understood the language of these natives he also understood the customs of these people and knew that it was forbidden to take food

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from another's camp even if that camp had plenty and yours had none. Since Darla and the boy both were hungry and Rick could feel his own belly churning and making odd noises that only a stomach with no food packed into it can make he began to cast his eyes about for a campsite with an abundance of food.

In a few moments he spotted an unattended campsite and saw that there were plenty of meat and green root vegetables lying out in the open, enough to feed four families four times. After crossing his campsite to get over to the other one he severed a huge piece of meat from the hanging elk carcass and grabbed up several handfuls of vegetables into a leather pack that he now wore strapped around his waist.

Once he'd made it back to his campsite he exclaimed, "Darla, look here!" and he showed her what he'd taken from the neighboring campsite. "Cook this up quickly before they come back," he said as he hid the meat underneath a leather skin and weighed all the ends of the skin down with heavy rocks that he'd quickly located from the fire pit. "At least we'll have supper tonight," he said to her. He behaved as if he had something on his mind and it probably was a slight feeling of guilt from the theft but before long he managed to come to terms with the "crime" knowing that he'd rather steal from one who had plenty of meat than to lie in camp like a fruitless human and watch a mother and child go hungry.

As the early evening fires from the village lit the mountainous area some riders came in on horseback. "We could see the firelight a mile away," one of them commented as he dismounted his mustang in front of his own campsite on the other side of Rick's and Darla's. The young hunter had a yearling elk laid crosswise over the rear of his pony and he now held it with one of his arms while he held the reins with the other. Within moments quite a few women from further up in the camp had flocked around him and out of the bunch one young woman came forward and helped the man carry the slain animal with a single arrow still sticking out of one side.

The two of them took it into the campsite and after hanging it upside down from a nearby tree the young brave quickly pulled the skin from the carcass using his sharpened rock knife and then threw it over to one

side. He then took the elk meat and began separating it and as he did he also handed out large portions to each of the women standing around. Finally after the last of the other squaws had left, each one carrying her own handful away, the young brave set aside a large portion of the front leg for his family and saw there was still plenty left. "Falling Moon, Falling Moon!" the young hunter yelled. "Send some one over! I have saved your family a bear-sized portion. Hah, hah!" the young man laughed as he pulled some more of the hide from the portion that he'd saved.

Rick responded automatically in the native tongue before he even realized he had done so, "Darla go get the meat from him." Without a moment's hesitation she went over to the neighbor's camp and upon receiving the gift she remembered to bow in a very humble way like the other women had done remaining silent throughout the ritual.

"Thank you, neighbor!" Rick yelled over to the other man who was now slicing part of his family's portion into long strips and pulling each single strip over the burning fire.

From under a large nearby stone Darla had earlier gathered some small firewood together that had been overlooked by the other women. Her collection consisted entirely of small twigs and peeled bark but it would be just enough to get a much larger bunch of logs off to a good start later on. From what she had found she had already managed to get a decent fire going for this evening's meal.

"I guess you're my husband in this world," she said to Rick in an almost humorous way and then caught his eyes as he tried to look away from her. "Say, you're not too bad looking either," she told him.

"Hah! Hah!" they both laughed.

"I could have done worse for that matter," he replied to her while still speaking to her in the native lingo.

The imprinted memories from the other side had carried over inside all three of them but these would soon depart from them. They were only memories that had been lived in a much different world and inside much different minds. Rick's and Darla's souls now resided inside these new bodies equipped with primitive minds. They now had the minds of hunters and gatherers and the past from the other side was gradually beginning to disappear one memory at a time.

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Rick hung his head and cast his eyes to the ground. Something had instantly made him sad and he quickly rose to his feet and walked out to the edge of the encampment not wanting to hear any conversation at this time. There he remained motionless for a long while staring up at the stars. A tear or two trickled down both sides of his face and his heart was momentarily overcome with sorrow as memories of his other life crowded in on him although they were slowly fading away. He wondered would he ever get to see his darling little sisters again or his loving parents but even those memories were growing dim. Life for him had taken a turn and a new passage in time had recently begun, one that he assuredly did not fully understand but in the midst of all this he did understand a very special thing, he was still amongst the living and he knew that he wanted to stay that way for as long as possible.

Rick heard a “thunk...thunk” and as the light from the fire rose up from behind him he also heard the sound of little footsteps and the breaking of a twig nearby. Suddenly something grabbed him around his right leg and hugged his knee cap slightly. It was the boy.

“What are you doing, young one?” Rick teasingly asked.

The boy at first said nothing but then mumbled, “Momma looks different, don’t she?”

“Yeah,” Rick replied, “but she’s still your Momma,” and it wasn’t long until he had the child laughing and asking him all kinds of questions as the two of them looked out into the starlit sky together.

This went on for quite awhile until Darla called out to them, “Supper’s ready. Let’s eat!” and the two of them quickly turned around and went back to the fireside both in better spirits now. Darla served up supper upon three flat plates made of shale with the main course being meat accompanied by cut vegetables and a hunk of bread used to wipe up the meat juices. The bread had been made from crushed wild grass seed and had been allowed to cook in the hot sun all day. It was baked inside a convenient handmade rock oven and given to her by a friendly old woman that camped nearby. All of it was shared by the three of them as they sat together on a rock.

After eating most of the simple but delicious meal Rick said to Darla, “They say that we are going to leave this location tomorrow because the buffalo herds are moving to the west and in order to survive we must

follow the roving herds. Guess they'll be breaking camp at first morning light or possibly even sooner so after dinner we'd ought to get our eyes shut for awhile. We probably have a couple of hundred miles to cover in the next three or four weeks and that's going to take a lot of effort on your part because the boy has to be taught how to walk long distances. It's not going to be easy for him," he said to her as if the words that he spoke came to him with great pain, "but don't worry, Darla, the boy will learn to walk and carry his own weight. He's healthy and he has a strong will inside of him. I'll watch over the both of you and we'll all make it to the higher plateau where they say the buffalo settle in for the cold winter months. At least we know we'll have plenty of meat to eat once we make it there."

The sounds of buffalo stirring off in the distance blended with those of the longhorn cattle that filtered throughout the openness of this flat territory and the thin air carried all of their voices for a very long distance. "Moo...moo." It seemed like one longhorn would speak and another would respond, sometimes from nearby and other times from far away. The settlement had been situated close by a seasonal trail that the herds of the high mountain longhorn and buffalo had used for migration purposes for a very long time. The trail etched its way nearby as the herds journeyed on their way up towards the higher plateaus for the winter. It was common knowledge for the people of the "Spear" hunting tribe that a full grown buffalo was able to dig down deep into heavy layers of snow and find things to eat. Although many would die from starvation many would live and the cycle of life would continue on and on.

The camp turned from an active bustle into a quiet and motionless state as all of the tribal people retired for the evening and curled up inside their warm bedrolls perhaps hugging each other for warmth as the campfires fell from full blaze into nothing more than hot beds of ashes and the northern wind united the cool breezes and cross-currents of the atmosphere into one strong breath that back on the planet earth would have started somewhere up in Alaska or Canada and carried through over the mountains and valleys of the north until reaching the camp.

As Rick lay thinking with only the starlight to share in his thoughts that night both the woman and her child lay safely sleeping, warm and

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very close by. He started to remember what life had been like on the other side as well as he could now recall and it occurred to him that perhaps life could be much better here in this new reality, much simpler he thought, and in some ways even more meaningful.

All of a sudden he received a flash of memory that took him back to where he'd first seen the old Mystic Indian dancing in circles and chanting in verse in a language that at the time he could not understand but had wished that he could, and as he pondered over that moment now it came to him what the old dancing shaman had been saying in his initial chant: "When the wind whispers to my people reaching deep into their souls using the subtle harmonies of nature that echo throughout the night there are other spirit voices that fall into our minds. There are voices in the dreams that cry out for resolution and have patiently awaited for your arrival. A story that must be told cannot rest forever. My people's past has already been written in the heavens a very long time ago but very soon, Falling Moon, you must become a witness to these times. There will be a spiritual struggle between you and something very gruesome that has been cast out of the Mystic and made into living dirt and clay. It will be of another form of flesh, yet still softer than stone. There will be a moment for you and this very evil spirit to struggle for life itself. Perhaps there will come a day when the great wolfman can never tell himself another lie." At this moment of revelation Rick allowed himself to fully accept his new life as Falling Moon.

Rick contemplated all this for a while trying not to overly examine the chanted words but his mind was plagued with deciphering the meaning of them and he lay awake in his bedroll, his mind turning over and over a detail here and another there until he finally began to discern a plan in what the old Mystic Indian had said, one that he was certain would unfold once they all reached the higher plateau. "Something I must witness. The ancient man's words must have a meaning," he thought to himself as the sound of a lone coyote crying to the moonlight carried through the night seeking some harmonious replies but receiving none. Only silence returned that night to the ears of the lonesome coyote and those of Falling Moon.

A thick fog hung onto the ground as the early morning sunbeams lit

the sky and displayed its pale red clusters of light that had been smothered by the deep blue cloud particles. The streaming light charged into the heavens in certain places making the morning sky appear somehow mysterious and full of adventure. One of the leading members of the tribe loudly declared that it was a good sky under which to travel so in high spirits the rest of the men raised their bows and then shot arrows high into the sky watching them quickly rise and then return to the ground, finally piercing the ground under the natural forces of gravity. And then one rider adorned with a spectacular headdress raised his spear high above his head and as he dropped it back down to his side the whole tribe of people started marching forward led by this solitary figure until he ultimately disappeared back into the ranks of the many.

Falling Moon's stallion pulled against the ropes that were directing his head but then finally the pony submitted allowing him to proceed with the others. At the prodding encouragement of his old neighbor Une (pronounced "Un-ee") he had obtained the fresh pony earlier in the morning from the stick corral before setting off on the march. Every family that had at least one skilled hunter in its midst was allowed the ownership of a single horse, but only one, because maintaining too many of the mustangs was simply not practical for the tribe. This was in accordance with one of the few laws that had been passed down from the chieftain: "One horse...one family."

In a leather pack that Darla carried upon her back were some supplies for herself and for her new family. She was now beginning to see Rick as Falling Moon, the great deer hunter, and her son had become Roaming Bull to her. Darla's mind was transforming just like the others and she especially noticed the changing when she began forgetting her past name and began thinking of herself as Peaches. Her back pack had become unlaced so she quickly retied it. It had just enough cooked meat stored inside of it for one meal plus a few vegetables like the roots she'd noticed the other families collecting. Just prior to the trip she'd observed many women digging away at the countryside to get these and had quickly followed suit. The rest of the supplies were loaded on a rickshaw that consisted of two long poles held together by two shorter poles so as to support the combined weight of all the material goods. To the bottoms of the long poles lightweight

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rock slivers had been strapped that contacted and dug into the top soil as the rickshaw was dragged along by two main tribal horses. Each tribal rickshaw carried the bulk of the supplies for many families combined. It was an ingenious concept because it took most of the weight off a single horse's back and allowed him time to pull off while still leaning into a rope harness rather than trudge along with considerable weight upon a single pony's back. Too much weight was a burden that many horses would not handle. Many would rebel by rearing up and putting up a fight.

Some of the other Mystic Indian squaws carried babies while others pulled human rickshaws fashioned for hauling their loved ones trailing behind them. No one was left behind anymore to fend for themselves all alone unless they chose it that way. Being part of the tribe was protection in itself and separation from the large number of the people could be very dangerous for some. There were tales floating around throughout the marching band of wayfarers concerning certain families that had been left behind or had somehow become separated from the tribe during a long march had never been heard from or seen again.

"The wolves probably got them," an old woman said to Darla as she was struggling forward while still pulling against the weight of a much heavier rickshaw than Darla's. "Yes," she said, "young woman, mother of Falling Moon's son, I am a reader of the mind and I can pick up what your thinking sometimes. A thought just popped into my head from nowhere and I feel that could be exactly what you were thinking about. Wasn't it you?" the old woman asked. "You were wondering what happens to those that are left behind, weren't you my dear? You have aroused my interest for some time now but I can't explain why. Are you thinking of dropping out? You know what I mean. Falling out. Taking off on your own, you and your man?"

"No! No!" Darla replied while the old woman was still shaking her head back and forth.

"Ah! I'm starting to get it now." The old woman seemed to see even further and continued to speak more. "You are from another place, aren't you? Ooh! Ah!" the old woman continued on. "I can feel it now and you are new to this land and its ways. Let me tell you, young friend, that there are a few things that you really must understand.

Recently, in the past few years, there have been a few tribal members that have fallen out of the tribe. They grew tired of the seasonal migration that we follow each year and they chose to try to make it on their own if they possibly could. Living alone in this world is possible but only if you know the country well enough and if a bad day ever comes to you, and you know there can be many of those, you may find that you need some help. Where do you look, my dear? Many try to get by with their own skills and capabilities. Some make it and others are never seen or heard of again. It is very possible that their fate ended inside of the hungry mouths of the much changed wolf packs. I've heard the young hunters talk around the campfires and they all claim for certain how the lobo wolf packs have all changed up in the high country. They say there is a new great leader of the lobo that controls every wolf and every cub and he is as evil as they come. However I am one of the oldest people still living and I can tell you that he is not new but has returned from some other place, perhaps Hell! The infamous killer known to the old hunters as Rideon has returned and he is not a mere wolf but is so very much more. They say that he is part man and the other part is a mistake of nature that sometimes resembles the wolf during the full moon cycle. He has recently lead a large pack of wolves that has in the past been very benevolent and an ally to us but under his control the wolves have changed their patterns and now during the full moon cycle they become very bloodthirsty killers and on many occasions have slaughtered some of the other tribes. Our people's kinship with the wolf and his spiritual families could soon be changed by this evil invader of nature. Our great leader Ut says that the spirits of the dead are at war with members of the wolf pack and especially against the great evil one called Rideon and he says that someday the werewolf will be devoured by a great emptiness that lies deep within his soul and the force of good will one day stop him but only then can the free will of all of the members of the "Wolves of Lost Pack" be restored. They almost always run in packs, yes, but for some of the wolves something very wrong has happened to their nature and Rideon has had the power to change their innocent minds. A full-grown wolf can kill a human in a short period of time and he can turn them on and off like night and day. They say when he is active and "in a cycle" that a certain pack of the

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wolves can hear his thoughts and they do his bidding for him. However they may also wail and pronounce their grievances to the moon that lights the evening skies.”

The Spear People for centuries had shared common ground with the wolves and their ancient families. Their close-knit association had matured each others’ knowledge of one another far beyond just being hunting partners in the wild and a spiritual kinship had developed between the tribe and the lobo wolves over a very long time. As the march continued forward Darla knew that she and the old woman were destined to become good friends and perhaps even confidantes someday as the elderly woman further advised her on more pressing subjects such as how to relieve some of the pain brought on by the weight of the ropes that held the rickshaws up by using strands of buffalo leather for cushion. The old woman seemed to Darla to be a godsend and she appreciated the attention that she received from the elderly woman as they plodded forward pulling an essential part of both of their lives closer to the mountain range called the Rockies.

The people came to a halt as the sky began to turn from pale blue to light orange thinking that even if there was still a sun up in the sky the magnificent ball of energy had to be hiding behind the shadowed mountain range that lay within one day’s travel period. As if on cue everyone just dropped what they were carrying and then unloaded their ponies and began to pitch camp. It seemed to Falling Moon and Peaches as though most of the tribe had been to this exact location sometime before because the men and women alike seemed to know exactly where to look for certain things around the area so they both just improvised and found things by watching some of the others fetch things out of the countryside such as twigs and large logs for the evening burn and other little things of that nature.

Soon there was a strong smell of meat cooking above open pit fireplaces. Sometimes a moderate wind would catch the scent and spread it throughout the entire campsite causing the men to lick their lips anticipating the taste of freshly cooked elk or buffalo.

The people’s chief Ut who was sometimes referred to as Blazing Arrow at ceremonial gatherings rode his stallion pony into the campground yelling in his native Mystic Indian tongue and waving his

finely adorned spear way up high in the air. He then spoke, softly at first, to his people who had already encircled him and were now beginning to close the ranks thereby forming a very much extended circle around the chief and his pony. When everyone had gathered round him he began to bellow more loudly so all might hear his words:

“My proud and wonderful people, the Northern Worlds beckon to the warm autumn winds of our prairie. They call them to the North, and when Mother Mystic calls even the wind must listen. Soon no longer will the trails of dust rise from west to east. Our calling is at hand, my people, and is much like the calling of the warm breezes to redirect themselves towards the Northern Worlds. Our calling and destiny lies in the West. The buffalo shall be easy prey for our hunters as they mire themselves sometimes to stomach-level looking for the green grasses that reside underneath the white powdery blanket of snowfall. Just as they have always done by this time each year the clouds have already emptied themselves onto the flatness of the High Plateau so that everything is now covered with a white life-taking blanket. Perched on the big valley’s edge where the snow is allowed to melt more readily we will sleep inside our warm and cozy tepees each night. We shall remember the westerlies for yet another season but our destiny is at hand and tomorrow at first light we must ride. Tomorrow, my people, we must test our ponies’ hooves and our families’ leather moccasins against the harsh and bitter trails of the Great Spirit’s higher grounds. Tomorrow, my people, we must lean our ponies into the shifting winds.”

When Blazing Arrow had first begun speaking to them the men, women and children had cheered to the elevations and different timbres of their chieftain’s voice but upon hearing these somber proclamations from Blazing Arrow’s lips most of the people were shocked and an intense silence befell the entire group as they watched their chief quickly lower his fancy spear to his pony’s side and then with a swift kick to the mustang’s flanks ride off into a band of lingering dust devils that seemed somehow to be awaiting his presence out on the distant horizon.

A coolness came with daylight the next morning and an icy dampness covered the weather-beaten yucca plants that were sparsely scattered here and there along with the other vegetation of the prairie. With a cold frost underfoot the chieftain attended to the awakening of

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his tribe with a fresh new vigor. A grizzly bear invading the camp could have been considered to be only a little more subtle than he. The chief was cranky and mean most would agree but undeniably effective. There were slow risers of course that needed his special attention but Blazing Arrow was possessed of a red-hot temperament that was just perfect for his job as chieftain, especially in these matters. He had been chief long enough to know that native folk had no respect for a chief unable to motivate his people and today he had decided the slow rising bunch of people was going to get some of his fiery tongue. It was just that simple.

The chief had listened to the elders of his tribe years ago when he was just a young buck and the words that had echoed across campfire sites for as long as he could remember were what guided him now: "Follow the river, both ascending and descending." Spurred on by these commanding thoughts Blazing Arrow raised his spear towards the southern provinces and from his present location took the tribe southwesterly seeking out the fresh water of the South Mystic River. He knew that the fresh water and brown trout would help sustain his people all along the journey. Not only would fresh "brownies" make for a tasty meal but fishing for them would provide the younger branch of buck with a much needed form of pass time. People would be able bathe and also would be able to hear the cold waters flowing downward as the daylight faded or the morning sunlight appeared.

Upon the chieftain's orders the tribe headed due southwest on their quest to find a river that they the Spear People thought had probably existed forever. The meandering river was a place on Mother Mystic where hard rock was constantly being tested against the liquid force of the cold yet anxious waters. The hard rock could not stand up forever against the running water. Even though it tried in places there was no stopping it forever. Water being the dominant force would ultimately win the battle although the struggle would go on for a very long time. The river meant a lot to the ancient tribe of great hunters and it had provided for many lives for a very long time. The smooth rounded edges of a polished stone taken from the river could provide evidence that the river had probably been in one place forever, or close enough to call it that.

The tribe's search for the South Mystic River was the beginning of a long and treacherous journey of ascension. By nightfall they located it and gathered *en masse* along its shores. Surprisingly even the stragglers had made it there. The river's edges glowed from the campfires that burned along both sides of it. The glistening fire lights ascended seemingly for miles and reflected off the shadowy canyon walls that encompassed the traveling Spear tribe.

Somewhere nearby about midway up the long string of lights lay Rick and Darla's encampment. Darla was laying out her son's bedroll which she had removed from her pony's rickshaw much earlier but was just now attending to. The pony had been corralled and then tied onto a fallen Douglas fir that lay sprawled out near the river's edge. A fresh puddle of water lay under his hooves and he stomped and whinnied about now and then perhaps out of boredom. Gathering wood from a nearby stump was at the forefront of Darla's mind until she heard a voice speaking to her from a nearby outcropping of rocks.

"There has been talk among the other women folk," said the voice as Darla moved in closer for a look and discovered it was the old woman. She sensed from the woman's tone of voice that she had bad news to deliver but kept on tending to her campfire chores as the voice continued on now growing louder and seemingly much more confident. "There's an extra large band of lobo wolves in the area," said the elder. "We've lost some stragglers already tonight down at the tail end. That's where the wolves always seem to start. Well, anyhow, dear, once those wolves get a taste for human blood they'll do just about anything to get more, and right away. Mark my words, they'll try just about anything."

Then an unfamiliar female voice sobbed from out of the shadows where Darla could not see who was speaking, "Lost my child, right out of my very own arms, yes, I did. Never see my first born ever again and from what I've seen those wolves do I don't think I'd want to anyhow."

The elder voice then rejoined the conversation saying, "Mark my words, those killers will visit each and every camp tonight and before they are finished with us the river will run red with blood. It's happened before. Just as I told you the wolves start at the rear and work their way up river. At first they kill and eat their fill but then they keep on killing for no other apparent reason than for the taste of blood and the

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thrill of killing. Well, there you have it,” the elder voice continued. “The wolves turn into just plain murderers. It doesn’t take many of those two hundred pound wolves to take a human being down and once they’ve got you on the ground, well...” And then silence overcame the talking pair and for a long while neither woman uttered a word or even seemed to breathe.

Darkness hid the faces behind the voices but could not block out the noise of the leaves cracking or the breaking of the twigs by the departure of the two women. Then from a distance Darla could barely hear one of the voices saying, *“Watch your boy! Watch your boy tonight!”*

CHAPTER 4

A sinister moon gleamed in the sky this night and black clouds darkened the planetary terrain below. A cold wind bellowed through the misted pines as Darla lay wrapped inside her deerskin bedroll. She lay watching the campfire which she was hoping would soon dance for her. “What a lazy fire this is,” she thought to herself. “The rock housing seems to be fine so why won’t this fire take off?” she wondered while watching the wood barely burn. Sometimes her mind would drift back to what the elder woman had spoken of and she was reminded of the eerie incident she and Rick had recently experienced together in another space and time. Could it really have only been a few days ago that they had been visited by those supernatural wolves on the other side and then the three of them had somehow been transported into new bodies and a new life? She remembered the sound of fear inside the old woman’s voice as she had spoken of the hungry pack of wolves that had attacked earlier tribes while sleeping defenselessly inside their bedrolls.

Soon her eyelids gave way to the weariness of the long hard trail and darkness closed in on her and as the moments of the evening passed onward she fell deeply asleep. The boy and Rick who had fallen asleep sometime earlier in the evening lay curled up beside the flickering fire, one of them snoring profoundly into the atmosphere.

Suddenly from the darkness intruded a frightening howl. It was a long and drawn out cry that was meant to beckon others. It was so intense and long-lasting that most of the tribe was drawn out of sleep by

it. Then another voice, this one much louder and closer, opened up, seeming to beckon all the others. This singular voice even more intense soon faded as all at once there were so many voices in the valley that the harmonies became deafening to human hearing. The ritualistic choir of seemingly thousands of wolves was pronouncing sentence upon the valley and those that lay within its boundaries. All at once a myriad of hungry eyes surrounded each campsite and all were looking in at the terrified people.

Above the clamor of the howling which continued as the siege was taking place Darla suddenly distinguished the voice of the old woman who had prophesied the coming of the wolves. The old woman was screaming out of her mind with terror and as a dark shadowy figure dived in at the elder she took off running away from her campsite. Next came a very loud death scream and Darla could barely see one of the old woman's legs kicking beneath the hungry pile of fur and fangs that boiled atop her. No fewer than twenty-five wolves began devouring her. Frozen in her tracks Darla was brought to her senses by a projectile that bounced at her feet which she recognized to be one of the elder woman's severed arms. It oozed red blood and long punctured veins hung freely out of the thing. Darla grabbed both sides of her face and began screaming as she ran over to where Rick and the boy stood defending their ground. That was when an extra large lobo wolf dived in at the three of them, slightly injuring Darla and the boy while biting off a piece of Rick's leg.

Skinned and bleeding the three of them stood huddling together with their backs to the fire, able to do nothing more than watch as the horrible nightmare unfolded. Saving their own lives meant standing by the fireside and holding ground. A young warrior was ripped apart very nearby, so close by that Rick could hear the victim's life blood dripping into a shallow pit that one of the killer wolves had made with its feet while tearing away at the man's jugular area. It appalled Rick but he knew that if he lost ground and allowed the slightest opening that his family would be next up for the slaughter.

The killing eventually slowed and then ended. The "table" was full of fresh human meat and most of the thousands of wolves were already gorging themselves upon the already freshly killed human carcasses that

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were spread out as far as the eye could see. The humans left alive were ignored by the tremendously powerful animals as though they were sparing a few for a future kill. Rick felt that a higher power had intervened that cold night because a good number of the tribe had survived, many unharmed and some torn within an inch of their lives.

Time seemed to drag on and on as some of the older members of the wolf battalion lingered in the area in order to feed upon the opened bodies that had been left upon the blood-red ground by the younger and much stronger members. Even old and grumpy wolves could create a much forbidding melee and at this point fighting with the feeding animals could have little practical value for the survivors. Seeing the remains of fellow tribe members picked clean by the lingering marauders was a horrible sight to behold but staying alive meant keeping oneself out of harm's way at any cost.

An old wolf that was still not contented with all of the killing laid his glowing eyes upon Darla and her frightened child whom she held firmly inside her mother's protective hug. The tired old wolf lay crouching and was almost ready to leap when one of Rick's arrows penetrated so deeply into the animal's left flank that the arrowhead protruded cleanly out of the remaining side. Rick mumbled, "Dirty rotten hide," and redrew his bow with another arrow which he impelled into the animal to make sure he'd finished off the murderous beast.

Finally, all the wolves were gone, much like the wind, but the memories would always remain for the living.

CHAPTER 5

An extraordinarily thirsty group of long-horned cattle meandered into camp one morning disturbing the corralled bunch of ponies so much that they very quickly whinnied up a storm of their own. Next came a band of thirst-driven buffalo creating havoc and this commotion became the last straw against any possible sleeping in for the tribe this morning as heads were now popping out of every bedroll in sight. Some noises

came daringly close to Rick's bedroll but they were only the sounds of human footsteps and Rick recognized one set of them by a faint misstep that he had become familiar with. Rick lifted up the deer skin flap of his tent so he could see outdoors. It was four hunters from a nearby campsite and they were beckoning him out of bed for a hunt.

"Come on out, Falling Moon," the men said gesturing as they spoke. "There is wild meat all around us," one of the voices interjected. "My family needs the meat from a good hunt today, not the meat of some more brown trout. Who can live on that? It's so lean and a good catch amounts to so little. Come on out, Falling Moon, or your campfire will soon smell like mine in the evenings, like burning wood only!"

Rick rolled to his feet just clearing the skin pelt flap that lay half-opened in front of his feet. He grabbed some jerky and was gnawing away at it when a husky-looking brave approached him from the rear. The brave was leading along one of the painted hunting ponies. The pony followed along behind him effortlessly. Each year only the fastest horses were selected to be hunting ponies. Most were stallions although there were a few mares. This particular strong little pony was a mare. Rick could tell this by the way that she walked and the way she placed her hooves on the ground. She had a brown stripe that ran from her mid-section all the way up around her neck and finally ended up at the separation between her light brown pointed ears. The filly became excited when Rick grabbed for the buffalo hide halter that was strapped around her head and neck. "Whoa, little pony," he said, his voice comforting her high-spirited nature. "Whoa," he said again using the same kind, understanding tone of voice. She whinnied and stomped her hooves into the crushed granite that lay beneath her. Somehow the pony sensed that an early morning ride was close at hand.

The early morning ride would consist of scouting about for track marks of nearby buffalo, elk and finally big-horned cattle tracks. If nearby herds were located then later in the day prizes would be taken. The meat would be cut up into small enough portions so that two pack ponies could be loaded up to full capacity. Finally by evening's dwindling light the fresh meat would be delivered to the awaiting hands of the tribe's people and then onto the hot burning cinders of a red ash wood fire over which families would eat and commune together.

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Rick grabbed his leather-hide shoes and his riding pelts and then mounted his spirited pony and squeezed his heels into the stomach of the horse causing her to lunge forward like an arrow out of a well-strung bow. The other hunters already mounted on their steeds were awaiting him over by the horse corral. Holding his spear high in the air Rick darted past the others on his way to the surrounding forest yelling out a hunter's cry as he passed them by. The other men followed soon after, their horses kicking up a flurry of dust particles as they pressed towards the woodlands together.

Rick's pony enjoyed the morning air. She loved to run so he let her have full stride. The yearling was full of vigor and she ran smoothly, much like a stallion would run, only faster than most he thought as he fed even more rein to her. Glancing back he realized that the others were far behind so he withdrew some length of the buffalo hide rein. She slowed some, then he drew in some more until the filly was trotting at a smooth pace and finally relaxed into a slow walking gait while the others caught up.

Back at camp and well into the morning Darla was coaching her young son about the long trek that was before them. She was telling him that he was going to have to walk for as long as he was able as there would be too many miles ahead for her to carry him the whole way. Earlier she'd prepared the old pony's rickshaw by setting the harness and other straps tightly so that the pony might pull her supplies along behind as the tribe continued to ascend further into the last remaining arm of the Valley of the Cynical Winds. The tribe looked tired as a large group of the people pulled out leading the way.

The older women of the group looked fragile and weak but even though some of them were getting on in years they were still strong from their long years of conditioning from having carried many loads upon their backs. Most days consisted of seven to ten mile stretches, seldom any longer.

As the ascension carried onward so did tribal relationships. While Darla was conversing with other squaws along the trail a young woman of smaller stature approached Darla. She spoke to her concerning tales that had been passed down through the centuries. She said there was believed to be a great body of water lying beyond the mountains. "It has

been said,” she went on, “that the great body of water goes on forever until finally it reaches the doorstep of the Great Spirit.”

“The Great Spirit then must have a very large doorstep,” replied Darla. Hiding her smile she tried not to let on that she might know more about the great body of water than what had just been told to her.

Soon the end of the trail came and both of the young women now exhausted could lay down their packs, tie up their ponies and relax for a few minutes. They’d made it to the end of the day. Darla’s back ached with tremendous intensity and it pained her to unstrap her sleeping son from his carriage and then place him inside one of the warm already opened hides that served as bedrolls. The boy had run out of energy on the last mile and had to be carried thereafter. He’d fallen asleep soon after boarding her backside and had felt like a dead weight on that last mile. “Oh! A woman’s job is never completed,” she was thinking while laying out all of the hides she’d recovered from the retired rickshaw.

The other young woman who had wandered off for a few minutes now approached her campsite and after she sat down and rested for a few minutes began to help Darla with the evening chores by tossing small twigs into the freshly started fire. “Why do you carry your child on the trail?” she asked bluntly.

Darla thought about it for a brief moment and then replied saying, “My son has tender feet. The boy walks along with the heart of a lion until he can walk no more and then I must carry him. My son may grow up to be stronger than most, perhaps even a chief. I believe that someday he will be strong like a stallion among his people and mean as a grizzly bear against his enemies. The skin on his feet will soon be tough as buffalo hide. Just believe it,” she said.

The squaw visited with Darla for awhile longer and then crossed back over to her own camp area. Her man was also due to arrive with the hunting party.

The hunters arrived just before all of the sunlight escaped into the dark abyss of the heavens leaving behind only pinhole traces as evidence that sunlight had once existed there.

Rick had a medium-sized white-tailed deer draped across his pony’s rear flanks as he rode into camp. The white-tail had an arrow sticking out just behind her left front shoulder. At that location the arrow had

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undoubtedly pierced the animal's heart causing instant death. More than likely the deer had felt no pain.

Over by the corral Rick dismounted his pony and then set his feet firmly upon the ground before unloading the white-tail. The commotion caused the little mare to march in one place for a moment before she settled down a little. Rick carried the deer over to a large rock that was sunken into the flowing water a few short feet and he began pulling the hide from the carcass using a pearly white quartz rock that he found lying on the surface of the large river stone. He took a large cut from the front section setting it aside from the rest for his family to enjoy later that evening. He then began motioning the women that already stood at the threshold of the stream waiting to come and draw out a portion. They did come in and while there did a fair amount of bickering. When they had all withdrawn there was not a single part of the deer remaining and only a bloody spot was left on the large boulder. The group of women had retreated just as quickly as they had come and after that Rick decided to linger at the creek's edge. This relaxing place next to the water was a place where he was able to just be for a few moments without having to think any thoughts.

Darla watched him through the blaze of the stick fire that she'd just gotten going. She admired him deeply and furthermore enjoyed watching him from a distance but Rick knew her space was still volatile and unapproachable at this time for him. He sensed that she was still unsure. He could often feel Darla's eyes upon him. It was something that he couldn't fully explain but somehow he just knew when she was looking at him. The sensation excited him in a manly way but he was not about to let on what he felt and neither was she.

The tall handsome man retreated from the river's edge carrying the deer meat that he'd already cut into three sections, each piece piled upon his strong arms. When he got to the campsite he stuck each steak with a long almost serrated river rock and placed each whole element in the stick fire inferno and supper began to cook. As he did so he thought to himself about those men who were unable to hunt for their families, perhaps due to a certain illness or malady of some kind, and had to send their women to get meat from another man's kill which was what had just happened a short time before at the river's edge. As Darla and the

boy approached him Rick said to them, “There’s no shame in women begging if their men are sick.” Both nodded their heads in agreement. He also explained to her that he had learned that it was however considered to be taboo to be seen at another campsite too often.

“My day was good. How was yours?” Rick asked of Darla who sat a short distance across the campsite from him with her child sitting between her legs and she replied that some neighbors had dropped by their camp to be friendly and that she had enjoyed their conversation. “What a nice fire,” Rick said to her as if he were trying extra hard to be friendly. “It burns better than that wet pine that we had burning last night I think. Don’t you? You must be getting better at finding the dry stuff.”

Darla laughed thinking it was funny the way he was speaking to her. He was such a confident young man in most ways but on this night there was a certain tone of insecurity in his voice.

The night rolled onward and Rick noticed there were several large clumps of wood that lay near the burning fire. Darla had fetched them out of the forest from the dead beetle-killed pine that was scattered throughout. The little insect known as the pine beetle had long since laid claim to this area of the mountain.

No one that night spoke of the killings that had occurred days earlier by the dreadful wolf pack but fear was still in everyone’s minds. Forgetting the killings was hard enough for everyone and to mention it was to bring back dreadful memories, memories better left to the past, so no one said a word about it. Darla piled the wood clumps next to her bedside, perhaps out of fear, so if she were awakened for any reason she might toss logs into the receding fire throughout the evening hours, just in case the wolves were to make another attack. In spite of all the tribe’s horrible memories everyone managed to sleep soundly this peaceful night.

CHAPTER 6

As dawn’s early sunlight began removing the spell of darkness from the territory thereby forcing its retreat back into oblivion there were already campground sounds that intruded and broke the morning calm.

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Among the sounds that encountered the crisp morning air Rick discerned sounds of a woman whimpering in the foreground. Soon after that other tribe members began to surround the crying woman and Darla crawled from her bedroll and also ran to her side. They all listened attentively to what she said:

“My husband heard sounds in the late night and went out into the darkness to investigate. It was then that I heard what sounded like trouble so I arose as well but when I did there was nothing. My husband, bless his soul, was long gone into the shadows. Then the poor lady went on crying, “Would someone please help me? Please look for my husband,” she begged the men over and over. “I know something is wrong.”

And then a group of the men scrambled from the camp yelling back to the woman, “We’ll find him,” as they disappeared into the forest. Darla returned to her campsite where she hoped to speak with Rick and the boy about the incident only to find that Rick had already gone out looking for the man. He’d even left part of his breakfast next to the slow burning fire. It wasn’t long till there was a loud yell from a short distance away. All the tribe members left in the area arose to their feet when a couple of men came walking back into camp. None of the men spoke at all to the tear-filled lady because she read the truth in their eyes. She broke out screaming at first and then ran toward the body’s location.

Darla suspected foul play but didn’t question Rick at first as he returned to their campsite but rather gave him a moment to recover from what he’d seen. After a few moments curiosity overtook her. “What happened?” she queried.

Rick then answered pathetically, “It was horrible! Whatever killed the man also ate him as well. Every piece of human flesh, both skin and meat, was stripped from the man’s bones. It devoured almost everything. It even gnawed away at the bones. I have never seen anything like this. None of us has. Darla, there were tracks all over the bloody area where the creature killed the poor man. The thing must have been huge. In places there were claw marks where the mighty killer sunk its deadly claws into the granite soil. Oh!” Then Rick trembled and said quietly so no one else could hear, “That creature

could surely rip a human into pieces with a single swipe. What we saw was so horrible that I could only look at the remains one time because my stomach became so weak that I had to turn away from the sight.”

Meanwhile a couple of the men folk had run after the elderly woman and led her to the exact location of the killing. Desperately she was trying to identify something from her husband’s remains but there wasn’t much left. One of the man’s leather hide shoes was all it took to set the poor woman into a frenzy as there was no longer any doubt in her mind that her husband had been slaughtered. Every member of the tribe knew it was for certain when she released her pain with her voice. “Oh...my Makita,” she let out over and over again.

Darla and some of the other tribal women ran over to comfort her but she rejected them with an angry voice. “Get away,” she cried. “I will grieve to myself. Today it is my tears that fall for Makita but tomorrow it may be your tears that fall onto the soil. Go back to your families and cherish them because there may not be a tomorrow for any of us.”

The rejected women felt great sorrow for the old woman. Her words stirred fear inside their hearts and they left her to mourn alone.

Soon word was relayed to the chieftain. He immediately declared this to be a day of rest and that no traveling was to be done. He also declared it to be a day to respect Makita’s passing.

Rick wandered into the forest alone. He needed time to think. It was cool out there and the morning air had a feeling of wetness, perhaps even snow he thought. As he continued to walk aimlessly through the forest he thought about what had just happened but then began to obsess about how he’d made it through the portal of time with no discernible injuries to mind or body. He wondered whether his original body was still alive. Perhaps it had expired and he, Darla and the boy could be stuck here forever. Perhaps the creature’s coming onto the scene had something to do with his transformation. He had no way of knowing right now but memories of other times and places kept invading his reality and each day he managed to put more of the puzzle together. Something told Rick that his most recent incident with the creature was no accident and that the killing of the old man was perhaps only the first of many more to come. He surmised that the old man had

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been intentionally awoken from sleep in the late night hours and then lured out into a place of easy ambush. He recalled that a mountain lion has been known to scream much like a female human in distress thus luring a courageous man out into the darkness and his ultimate death. Perhaps this life taker, too, has a special way of calling out for someone. Rick meandered through the forest for awhile longer and eventually made his way back to where the others were. The hours of the day had seemed to fly by. Rick had a strange unexplainable feeling that time itself was nearing an end. The looks on the faces of the others told Rick they were feeling similarly strange yet none spoke of their experience. Was this all only a dream that was nearing an end? Rick concerned himself with this thought for a brief moment and then re-entered the camp.

As Darla greeted him Rick responded with a half-hearted, "Hello," as he sat down near the red flames at the campfire that Darla had going. Dinner cooking over the blaze was a welcome sight for Rick. He was just beginning to relax when Darla confronted him.

"Do you feel strange this evening, Rick?" When he did not reply she went on to say that she had heard a voice that afternoon calling quietly from deep within the forest saying, "Do not resist me, my children. Come out to play. Come out to play with me tonight, all my wonderful children." Darla then spoke of the strange way that most of the other tribal members had spent their day, cupping their ears. No one had been behaving normally. Darla went on to say that the voice had stopped just as evening started to come on.

As Rick sat there taking all of this in, darkness quickly had fallen and snowflakes had also begun to come down. Rick thought to himself that the night time had become as black as black could ever get. There was a full moon and yet there was no shining moonlight at all. The full moon was smothered behind darkened clouds and the light given off by the campfires emptied into the great darkness seemingly sucked up like water into a sponge. Darkness surrounded everyone and penetrated everything and every person. Even the ponies kept quiet on this night. There was talk of many wolf sightings that had occurred just before sundown and the rumors were spreading like wildfire from campsite to campsite.

Soon a group of men began strolling through the area, each man carrying a torch in one hand. Each of these men had been instructed by the chieftain to speak with each and every person and to commit every face and voice to memory. Rick watched Darla and the boy closely as the torch carriers passed through the area and observed that she became nervous and unsettled for a brief moment. He wondered about this but did not ask her about it.

Later into this unsettling night a great silence befell the area. It was what one might call a deafening silence, more powerful than anything any of them had ever experienced. There was an impalpable terror in the air, the kind that empties a human from the inside out giving one a feeling that one's guts have cleanly been ripped out. The silence was all too powerful and gave Rick a feeling of certainty that something dreadful was bound to happen that there was no way to prepare for.

Rick remembered that he had seen a nearby cave earlier in the day with bats flying out of it. For some reason that he couldn't explain he now felt compelled to go to it without hesitation. He gathered a few nearby blankets along with the boy and Darla and together they went there. Just as they made it to the mouth of the cave suddenly a singular howling began. As had happened just prior to the recent slaughter of so many of the tribe's people the volume was intensifying into a deafening level. Darla quickly started a fire with whatever she could find in the cave's opening but it seemed minuscule against the other surrounding elements outside the cave. Amongst the firewood in the cave site there remained only a few small twigs and a few more clumps of wood. "What next?" Rick thought to himself as he peered outside from the entrance of what all too easily might become a rock tomb. The fire was bound to die and if it did then so would they all. The "voices from hell" intruded into the corridor of the night once again only much louder this time. It seemed as though the number of voices had increased even more.

The people still at the campground had begun to panic and there was loud screaming of all sorts. Men were yelling angrily that the devil had come. Next onto the scene appeared the eyes. Rick could see them outside because the campfires were still burning and light was reflected from them. There were not only hundreds nor thousands but seemingly

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hundreds of thousands of bright yellow menacing eyes that had appeared seemingly out of nowhere and lingered there as if awaiting some instruction.

Eventually the night became silent again. The men and women off in the distance did not scream anymore and the children no longer whimpered. What remained inside Rick was an overwhelming sense of fear as he stood motionless at the open entrance to the cave. He and his family had survived so far but he wondered what the next moment would bring as their log fire disintegrated into a small twig fire. The flame narrowly lit the cave's walls and cast shadows that streaked ahead of the rock edges. The cave's entrance would probably appear bright orange to any possible survivor that might still be alive in the killing field. It seemed unlikely that any of the tribe could still be alive. For that he could only hope. There was no telling because all three of them were hopelessly trapped. While in the cave the boy had uncovered a single club that still had a clump of dirt stuck to it making it heavy. Rick now held on to it like everything in the world depended upon it, knowing that their three lives probably did.

All at once the air became heavy with dampness and vapors rising all about and at the bottom of the upheavals lay many pair of betraying yellow eyes. A strong sense of desperation overwhelmed his senses as the adrenaline pumped through his veins. All three of them, Rick, Darla and the boy, now stood huddled together at the cave's opening, their hearts beating as one. What then befell them happened so quickly that there was no time for suffering. All three were killed, their bodies torn to pieces. Rick's last vision was seeing Darla being devoured by a great white lobo. As the pack fed itself this night on the bloody flesh of the Spear People there was a silent arising of souls. The shaman from the other side awoke the three from their trance that had taken them into another realm, but at the same moment they awoke and their minds returned he disappeared into a shadow and was gone from them.

CHAPTER 7

The sound of a complete body support system functioning echoed from a distant place and to Rick it became his mental focus that guided

him through the white tunnel of light. The sound of the machine pumping away in complete rhythm with his own body functions filled his conscious mind now and he immediately wanted freedom from it. “Let me off of this thing!” he tried to yell but for some reason his mouth would not open. Instantly he kicked his legs and the sound of joints cracking filled the room.

A voice quickly responded and the sensation of being touched overcame him. The voice said, “Don’t move! You’ll hurt yourself! Don’t move. You are in the hospital. We will get you moving soon enough, just don’t move!”

Rick recognized the sound of Darla’s voice crying out in extreme pain. She kept yelling for her son Roaming Bull but no one knew of a Roaming Bull.

“Oh, you mean the young boy? He’s recovering quite nicely,” the nurse reassured her. “Don’t worry. He’s in the adjacent room. It’s a miracle you’re all coming out of this together, simultaneously. This is one for the record books.”

Suddenly as Rick regained his voice he cried out, “Oww! What the heck are you doing to me?”

The same voice that had previously responded to him returned, “I’m testing your reaction to stimuli, I mean to pain.”

“Well, stop it now or I’ll kick your head off.”

A loud “crrrack” was the sound as Rick flailed his needle-filled arms in a half-hearted attempt to swat at the doctor. He looked around the room and noticed Darla was shaking while trying not to move out of what appeared to Rick to be an extreme state of fear. “Move! You move it!” Rick yelled spontaneously in a desire to snap her out of it. “Move or I’ll kick your butt right now!”

This impulsive yet harsh command brought about the desired result because Darla suddenly began to move as well.

Rick had barely assumed control over his body when the hospital door swung wide open sending a whisk of stuffy air through his ruffled hair. It was Ned. He looked both shocked and perplexed. Sweat formed upon his forehead, his knees began to shake and before everyone’s eyes he hit the ground like a ton of bricks. One of the nurses yelled, “Get a liter quickly! We’ve got another one!” At this several of

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the emergency staff appeared and loaded and hauled Ned off to another room for recovery.

Time passed and all four recovered quite nicely. Later on Rick and Darla became common-law married. The boy James to the present has never forgotten about his past days when he was called Roaming Bull but as in everything in life there must be change each new day is destined to become just another memory for us all. The couple ended up moving close to Rick's family up in the mountains so that Rick could be near his ailing father who had aged and was now sick with arthritis such that he could barely get around the house much less have steady employment. Rick and Darla helped him and his mother out in every way that they could.

CHAPTER 8

One night in May when Rick and Darla were lounging about in their living room area relaxing together while viewing the local news on a recently purchased new television set that they had managed to set aside enough money for something very interesting popped up on the early edition that intensely caught their attention. The announcement that the anchorman bellowed out to the whole region's shock and dismay was, "Unexplained mountain mutilations, and the death toll has risen to six!"

The killings had recently occurred on the nights of the full moon cycle. All the bodies had been found at or near the bottom of climbable trees which seemed to indicate that the victims must have run to the trees and attempted to escape whatever was after them by climbing up into them but somehow hadn't made it there fast enough to save themselves. In each separate incident a cadaver was found to have been mostly consumed and the time frame within which these atrocities had to have been perpetrated seemed to indicate that either something very large, or possibly many creatures, had performed the grisly deeds.

Rick recalled that he had recently heard sirens around from time to time coming from the village about a half mile down the trail but at the moment had not given them much thought because they were just sirens and it was not unusual to hear them a couple of times a year echoing

through the emptiness of the mountain corridors. Unsettled by the disturbing report the couple shut the TV set off and retired to bed. The news was much too great of a shock to them on account of certain similarities that they recognized from their mutual “dream state”.

The next afternoon after receiving an early release from work Rick was sitting on his front porch whittling away at a piece of hard wood when he decided to take an early evening walk. The trail out back which led up to a magnificent large outcropping of granite rock seemed to beckon him for some strange reason. A large owl flew overhead as Rick carried himself forward towards the place that drew him on. Light simply did not shine in this place after a certain hour, and that time was long past and only a glimmer of the day remained. After Rick had walked a considerable distance a single voice resonated from a nearby darkened glen filling Rick with shock. The sound caused Rick to freeze in his tracks, not daring to move a single muscle. Straight ahead Rick beheld a shadowy figure lingering in a darkened clearing off to one side of the trail.

“So you have come back, my friend,” said the voice. “What, was one life not enough for you? You should have died like the rest of the Spear People. At least they did it with honor!”

Rick could feel the blood in his arteries pumping away and thoughts of the previous day’s newscast filled his mind. “Are you responsible for the six deaths last full moon?” Rick asked the shadow.

After a moment’s silence the shadow responded, “Yes, it was I! What about it?” It then went on to say, “You know that pulsating knot on your neck? Let me tell you, it is appealing to me. I would like nothing more than to open it up for all the world to see. A little ‘spilled milk’ on the forest floor goes a long way for a hungry fella like me.”

Just then Rick got a glimpse of what was speaking from the shadows. The eyes of the creature were almost as large as Rick’s clenched fist and the odor was horrible. The foulest of rotting flesh could never compare.

Rick was starting another sentence when the creature silenced him, “Shut up! Shut, shut, shut!” At this point the creature could barely speak because of the substance that was pouring out from his salivary glands. “You are destined to be my witness or you would already be

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dead. You see, from my high perch upon a rock monolith I watched the herd of natives that you once called your family, the Spear People. The world, it seemed, was spread out before me. I could see the ends of the planet from my vantage point. I fell asleep for some time and when I awoke your people were still lingering like lost sheep. I could not help myself so in the Valley of the Cynical Winds my comrades and I devoured them...BUT, RICK, I SAVED YOU FOR ABSOLUTELY LAST! You see, you were the last there and now you will be the only one here!”

“What do you mean?” Rick could not refrain from asking. “What do you mean?” he asked again after getting no response.

“You’ll see. Fly, hah, my sweet little witness! Bye, fly, bye!”

This evening’s hours had changed everything for Rick as he stood in the same place shaking like an autumn elm leaf. His immediate surroundings had become a place of horror. A stark nightmare could not begin to describe it. His wonderland Eden if he had ever known one had suddenly become HELL! The shadowy creature had departed from his presence but the horrible smell lingered. A sliver of light cast from the heavens above stroked Rick’s leather boot tip and dust flew ahead of him as he turned towards home and tried not to look back which was impossible for him that night as he staggered down the dimly lit trail seeking peace of mind but finding an even a greater fear as he opened the cabin door. He wondered how he could ever explain to Darla what had just transpired. Feeling that he could never fully explain the events he decided to keep “mum”. Something like this would scare her out of her wits. After at least one night’s sleep and maybe in the morning he would tell her.

Morning came like a land mine explosion. Rick’s head shook and his chin almost knocked a hole in his chest. His neck muscles flexed and he realized that he’d fallen asleep and was falling half out of a kitchen chair. He ran to the calendar which hung daintily underneath the kitchen counter. The calendar told him it would be two days until another full moon. “Two days! Only two!” he thought to himself. “I must do something to stop this, but what? Who do you call to kill a werewolf? Oh, come on, this is the twenty-first century. People would say this and more if the wrong phone call were made but something has to be done!”

Then it came to him, an article in the newspaper he'd recently read. The paper had read, "An ancient evil that has savagely beset mankind since the most ancient of times has evidently resurfaced in our times and is currently at large." This so-called "evil" had apparently eluded capture by a research institute down in Boulder but the story had been so unbelievable that Rick, and most likely everyone else who had read it, had dismissed it as a bunch of "hooey". Recalling that there had been a phone number at the bottom of the article Rick made a quick search through the stack of newspapers in the kitchen closet and upon finding the number quickly jotted it down. He felt strongly that contacting someone at that number might be his only hope.

Darla entered the kitchen area from the bedroom where she had slept alone. She offered Rick a glass of milk just as he started to finger out the number.

"Ring, ring," and finally someone answered.

"Yes, how can I help you?" the secretary questioned.

"Ahh, you know that article that was in, well, last week's newspaper, and it spoke of an ancient evil, one that everyone has disbelieved? Well, I have seen it. Just the other day, you know, it spoke to me."

"Sir, do you know how many of these prank calls we get here? Ah, what did it say to you?" the secretary asked him with a tone of skepticism in her voice.

After a moment's silence Rick spoke, "It told me I was meant to be a witness!"

"Just a minute, sir, I'll connect you with Professor Pinkman. Hang on please," the secretary responded.

A male voice quickly came on the line saying, "Hello, this is Pinkman. Can I help you?"

To that Rick said, "Hello, my name is Rick and I have had direct contact with a werewolf and lived to tell about it."

"Yes," Pinkman replied, "my secretary just mentioned something about that. She said you were going to be its only witness. Is that true?"

"Well, that's what the thing said to me," Rick returned. "Otherwise I'd be a goner and I believe it spoke the truth!"

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“Ahh,” Pinkman said in an excited tone. “Could you come on down to this address? We definitely must speak to one another in secrecy.”

Rick hastily wrote down the address of 233 Riden Lane. It was still morning but the roads would be cleared of rush hour traffic by now. “Yes, Professor Pinkman, I’ll meet you in exactly two hours at the address you just gave me, sir, and I’ll bring my wife,” Rick said and hung up the phone with a loud thud. Darla was still in the kitchen but had finished her meal. “We are going to the city, dear. I’ll explain on the way there. Okay?” Looking at Rick with a quizzical expression on her face Darla gathered up her purse and jacket and they quickly departed for Boulder.

Later as they arrived at “The Pinkman Institute of Mysterious Science” Rick let out, “Is this a joke?” The place looked like an armory. The guards peered at Rick and Darla through a small opening after Darla placed her open hand upon the computer screen according to the instructions upon the front door. Amazingly it accepted her hand print right then and there.

A voice then came over the speaker that was attached to the computer terminal, “Next!”

“Go ahead, Rick!” Darla said, urging him to do the same thing she had done. “Go ahead, it won’t hurt you!”

Reluctantly Rick placed his hand on the screen and the voice came on again, “You are being scanned and prints are being stored in the mainframe. Please wait while a background check is performed.”

Moments passed and finally the steel door which must have required a tremendous motor to open swung slowly open upon a medium-sized man with long shaggy gray hair which looked rather like a mop head that had been placed upon his head in a big hurry.

Rick thought to himself that this man was not the average yuppie sort and then he addressed the man with a question, “You are Professor Pinkman?”

“Ah, yes, young man,” he replied. “And the young lass. Her name is?”

To that Darla responded, “I’m Darla, and sir, since I am still in the dark on this whole matter, would someone be so kind as to explain to me what is going on?”

“Well, dear,” Pinkman answered, “this is a matter that cannot be explained with mere words. It is better if you have yourself a look. You must be prepared for something extremely shocking and if you have the courage then I’ll allow you to accompany us. If not, please wait in your car.”

“Oh, Mr. Pinkman. I must know the truth. I’m already much too involved,” Darla responded.

“Well, OK, young folks. Welcome to Hell’s Pit. Our scientists have been experimenting with only one live specimen for some time now and he’s a dandy. He has confessed to hundreds of human mutilations. He claims to change from a somewhat human form into something not so human and after lengthy study I have found no reason to doubt the specimen. He says that something shredded his body in the past and that life changes for him between night and day. He also claims that in the period of the full moon he changes from a man into a hybrid wolf. I know this is an unbelievable story. Shall I stop now?” Pinkman queried, studying the expressions on Rick and Darla’s faces.

“No, continue please, Professor,” Darla quickly replied.

“Well,” Pinkman went on, “engineers have been called once again to reinforce the bottom cell’s metal doorway without going inside. Many times the specimen has almost escaped. It seems that he possesses tremendous ESP abilities. We force our guards to wear special lead helmets that shield their minds from the beast and usually they work. It has been my perception that our research doctors truly believe that the specimen is indeed a living werewolf although none of them will openly admit it. You see, because they are members of the scientific community they must have a scientific explanation for everything yet most of them will not stay on the facility on a full moon nor after dark. Most of our guards have been hand picked so as to meet the prerequisite of a very low IQ level because they have thicker brains, you see. We are presently less than forty-eight hours away from another full moon and, my young friends, I will not be found here either when that occurs. You see, I have seen on video tape what can happen to a man during that phase of the moon. We have already lost five of our staff to the phenomenon and I won’t be the next. No one is allowed near the cell after dark. Even during a half moon the specimen demonstrates extra

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special powers of persuasion and has an uncanny knack for conversation that could lead anywhere. When the specimen first came into captivity in our facility the doctors tried to interview him during a full moon and it was not a pretty sight what happened. The creature devoured their bodies within an hour and then he made weapons with the bones and when the full moon phase had passed he slept for seven days. What darkness lies in the human mind I think that this man-beast can tell if any one can! Well, you have been briefed now. Are you still ready to see?" To that no one said a word. "Okay! Follow me if you will." Pinkman then waved his hand in the air and the steel door closed behind everyone. "This way," he motioned and Rick and Darla followed.

Another door was soon encountered and once again each person's hand print was required. The computer voice said, "You are now entering the 'red' level. Metal helmets are required from this point on!"

"Strap them on good," Pinkman said, mumbling how heavy the helmets were for an old man to wear as he walked through the opening. "You know I think there is another one and he's roaming free out there. I can scan your face like a book, sonny boy. I have seen the evidence files down at the station. The bones don't lie and neither do faces and yours spells something. You have seen something unusual out there, haven't you Rick?" Pinkman spoke as if he already knew what it was that Rick was going to say.

"Yes, what I have seen is even beyond the creature you have described to us," replied Rick.

Finally, upon reaching the bottom level of the facility they were allowed a moment's rest. Darla's neck was hurting from the weight of the helmet and so was Rick's so they were allowed to sit in a pair of plastic chairs inside a concrete room that was not far from where Pinkman had just disappeared. He soon re-entered with a smile upon his face that no words could ever explain. "Come to the control room now. They are loading the cattle for tonight's feeding. He may soon begin to awaken and then we must leave immediately for your safety. You will be allowed to witness part of the genetic conversion but only a small portion of it. The sound of the cattle milling about may bring about an early awakening.

"Those poor cattle," Darla cried. "Are you going to let it eat them

in cold blood like that? Oh, how cruel!”

“It’s better them than us, deary,” was Pinkman’s response.

Then, all of a sudden, both cattle ran over to the farthest corner of the creature’s cell and the specimen began to move about as if he were in some kind of pain. As for the way his body began to move a contortionist couldn’t have done better. Then it seemed as though something were carrying him around the room, perhaps a ghost or an evil demon. He was slammed into one wall and then the other. All of a sudden the motion stopped and he lay in the middle of the floor, seemingly broken. His contorted body began to grow longer, rear end first. It was a dreadful sight. “Any hair this time?” Pinkman asked of another scientist.

“No, not yet,” was the reply.

“It’s going to be another hard one,” somebody said, seemingly out of turn and over a speaker.

The poor creature crouching on his hands and knees at this time must have been eight feet long and appeared to be in a semi-conscious state. He was pouring feces out of his rectum onto his lower leg portion.

“It’s time to leave now,” Pinkman said emphatically. “This is not a sight for any sane person to watch, not even me. He could stay like this for an indefinite time. It must be dreadfully painful for him at this time. A change like that is enough to destroy any man’s sanity. Well, at least the complete transformation must be some kind of release. I mean, once it’s done then surely the pain must stop.”

“Yeah,” Rick responded, “for that creature but then people begin to die. We must go now! Now!”

Pinkman ordered Rick and Darla directly to the elevator. He wasted no time shutting the elevator door. Breathing heavily he wiped the sweat from his forehead. “Seen enough?”

“Yes,” Rick replied, also breathing heavily. “I have seen this creature before, but up close and where I live. You have read the news stories. You know of where I’m speaking. There is no doubt. But how do you destroy such a creature? The fairy tales are nonsense! This thing is bad, man. I mean plain bad! To hell with the silver bullet hype. That thing eats silver bullets and picks them out later to fill his teeth.”

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"I know," Pinkman answered. "Our only hope is containment. It has worked so far."

The door at the top level sprang ajar and everyone ran out to the final doorway.

"Come on! Come on! I can't get out of here fast enough," Pinkman yelled.

"Ring, beep," and then the voice from the computer spoke giving instructions for the hand print scanning necessary for exit procedures.

"Now what will I do? I'm sweating! This lousy machine," Pinkman shouted as he wiped the palm of his hand on the only dry place on his body, his rear end.

The latch to the front door finally sprung apart and the door inched open thereafter.

"Oh, you freaking thing!" the old man swore to the steel door as it finally allowed him to emerge into the open air.

The old '69 Chevy that Rick had relied on for years surely looked sweet as everyone piled in. Starting the car Rick asked Pinkman, "Where to?"

"Anywhere but here," was the old man's reply. "Go, man, go!"

Rick laid his foot into the gas pedal of the classic and headed for the mountains. Old man Pinkman disembarked a couple of miles due west of Hell's Pit. He promised to get right in touch with them after contacting an army general buddy of his.

Rick could still remember the professor's departing words as he stepped on the sidewalk to await a rapid transit bus, "Son, I won't let you down," and as he drove away Rick hoped that he meant it.

Later that day back up in the higher country along a pond old Ted sat next to the shore watching for a wiggle on his light gauge fishing line. His old gray beard almost touched the ground beneath his soil-covered pants. "No wiggle," he thought. "Maybe I'll get one before I get too darned hungry." At that moment he spotted a beaver that last spring had declared beaver rights to the southern batch of thickets that watered the pond seasonally. Old Ted ignored his fishing line long enough to study the dam builder and soon two other men appeared. Out-of-towners he supposed. "Plop, plop," and in went their sinkers, not too far from his.

"I heard," one of the men said, "that the fishing is good up there," and he threw a rock in the eastern direction towards Rick and Darla's place. "Oh, and it's a good walk up to that lake that everybody speaks of. Only a few short miles, and they say that there is a really sweet trail leading to it."

Ted overheard the talking and broke in. "You boys thinking of going up to Lake #4, are you?"

"Yeah, what about it?" one of them retorted.

"Well," Ted responded, "I could tell you some things about that place that maybe you'd ought to know before you go traipsin' up there."

"What do you know, old man?" spoke the larger of the two strangers.

"You sure that you fellas really want to hear this because right now I'm not sure I really care to tell you anything, Fellas!" spoke Ted further. "Well," Ted said scratching his head, "I was once young and mouthy so I'll let it ride. Okay. Do you guys remember reading about the six mutilations that recently occurred? Well, those killings happened up there. People say some strange stuff has been going on otherwise as well. You know, stuff that can't be explained."

One of the strangers rudely interrupted, "My line hasn't even been touched. Let's go! Let's leave the old cuss alone." After reeling in their lines they left but before getting very far down the road one of them pitched a dirt clod at old Ted. He took it in the side of his leg and barely flinched, seeming as though he expected it.

Just then the old Chevelle that Rick cherished blazed by kicking up a storm of dust overhead that quickly settled. It was homeward bound. Ted could see Darla's hair hanging out of the right side window, being stroked by the breeze as they went eastward. Ted had known Rick and Darla for sometime and he considered them to be friends. He wasn't worried about them. They were knowledgeable by now of the recent events, but those two hoodlums, they were another story. He thought maybe he'd keep an eye on them.

The couple made it home. "Oh, what a relief!" Rick said as the car doors slammed shut.

"Yeah! Home's still here, thank God," said Darla. She seemed exhausted as she lifted her back pack over her shoulder and headed

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towards the front door with Rick leading the way.

“Creak!” sounded the front door as it moved finding gravity as it was still half ajar.

“Evening is coming on,” Rick stated. “It will be a full moon in a couple of days. What more can we ask for, dear? I’m not sure that I want to be here or even in this country right now. I mean, that thing was awful down at the institute. It frightened me deeply and who knows what the sight did to you. Something very similar to that spoke to me up the trail and already my hair is beginning to stand on end and the night is still young.

After a moment’s silence Darla broke in. “Get a fire going. We are going to make it if he have to take the dirty rotten thing on barehanded.”

Rick took the order and was handling some of the wood out on the rear deck when he heard a spooky noise off to the left. War drums started beating inside of his mind as the adrenaline pumped rapidly into his system. “Ah, just a pointy tipped native squirrel sneaking a last bite of something before sundown. What a relief,” was the only thought that Rick could muster up. The animal ran quickly to a nearby tree. “That’s odd,” Rick thought to himself.

A voice from not too far away traveled through the air. “You folks all right up here? Hello!”

“It’s Ted!” Rick let out with a sigh of relief.

“Folks, come on out,” Ted hollered.

“Oh, Ted. It’s you. How are you doing? Come to stay the night?” Rick quickly questioned.

“Well, I’d appreciate it if I could,” was Ted’s instant reply. “You see, the sun is about down now and I’m on the trail of a couple of trouble makers that headed this direction earlier. You know it’s my job to maintain the lakes up here and I got a funny feeling about these two fellows. They came up the trail. Did you see them, Rick?”

“Well I should have,” Rick responded. “The trail is only a hundred yards up the mountain. It’s close by so I should have heard something if they came this way.”

“Well, maybe not,” said Ted. “You know, these guys are kind of sneaky.”

“Well, come on in, Ted, and grab yourself a chair. We got plenty to

talk about, old friend.”

The orange of the evening sky and the blue tones as well began to darken just like the spirits of the two men as they sat talking at the kitchen counter as Rick revealed parts of his story to the long-haired old man who patiently listened. The old man’s cheeks turned from natural red to beet red as the story lingered and never found a humorous ending.

“You are serious, aren’t you Rick?” the old man observed. “You both really seen something down there that has frightened you half to death.”

The suspense began to mount as Rick continued on with his story. All of a sudden parts of the house began to shake. A book fell out of the shelf and hit the floor with a “wham”. Someone was at the door.

There was a loud knock and then a voice. “It’s Pinkman, it’s Pinkman!” the man spoke loudly through the screen and half opened the front door.

The grinding hum of much machinery came closer and closer. Everyone ran to the window and looked out in time to see a small army of men and machinery. One piece of machinery had radar on the back. Some new-looking Hummers rolled up the incline like it wasn’t there. They were heading for the rock outcropping where the last sighting had been made.

“It’s a full-blown moon day after tomorrow,” Pinkman said. “May I come in folks? I just got back from Colorado Springs or I’d have been here sooner. Everyone okay?”

Ted’s lip just about hit the ground because some of the story that he was fixing to disbelieve was becoming believable.

“Our men are moving in. It will be most of the night before everything can be set up properly so it might get a little noisy up there, but don’t worry. Your house will be protected. Do any of you folks need any sedatives? I also have a bag of roll-your-own cigarettes here somewhere. Oh, dear,” Pinkman spoke further. “It’s for the nerves,” he said as he offered Darla a pill which she declined.

“Got anything on the grill?” Pinkman inquired. “Man, I could use a bite of something. I didn’t even stop to eat. The airport was a nightmare, almost as bad as the institute when that thing in the bottom level gets fired up,” Pinkman said as he fumbled in his jacket for

something.

Rick spoke from the other room while looking out the window. "Sure are a lot of headlights up there. I wonder if the creature is still there."

"Oh, yes," replied the professor. "That thing isn't afraid of any person or thing. To my specimen those soldiers with their weapons in hand would mean nothing more than a regular meal that it doesn't have to travel very far to get. I'm afraid that I may have gotten them boys into a heck of a mess if it's true a creature similar to ours is up there."

At that moment one of the sergeants knocked on the door and walked right in without waiting for an answer. He introduced himself as Sergeant Placer and addressed Rick. "Sir, I am here to stockade your house and property. Come hell or high water that's what we're going to do." Then he pulled a piece of paper out of his jacket pocket, laid it on the table and said, "Please sign here. Do you have a pen? This paper gives us full run of the place should the creature get this far."

"What do you mean this far?" Rick queried.

"Nothing, sir," Placer replied. "What I mean is this thing could be very hard to handle or capture and from what I've seen on video tape the thing is not at all friendly. Would you please just sign here? It's just a formality. I promise not a single twig will be broken unless we are in hot pursuit of the creature, and if anything is broken, well, the Pinkman Institute will compensate you. Don't worry about your lovely house, sir. It might pay to worry more about your lovely wife."

After signing the agreement Rick passed the pen to Pinkman who also signed without hesitation. The sergeant made his exit out the front door, yelling at some of the soldiers as he made the front deck, "Men about face, forward march!" At that he staggered a platoon of about thirty men around the perimeter of the house while Rick, Darla and Pinkman looked on from the window. "Dig in men," was the next command. The soldiers dug out the foxholes and strung rope with tin cans and other objects suspended from it around the outskirts. Each man was heavily armed and had night scopes on each weapon. The sergeant lingered until all of this was well underway then uttering a choice cuss word headed back up the trail to where the rest of the company was also beginning to dig in with the intention of setting up a

gauntlet of fire power which would probably put the creature on the defensive, and then the final point of the gauntlet was to be the cabin area. When the sergeant found a spot for his foxhole he immediately communicated with Pinkman on a two-way radio.

“Pinkman here. What do you want?”

“I need to talk with the man called Rick! Over!”

“This is Rick,” was the reply.

“Look!” came the voice of the sergeant which was coming through clearly over the air waves. “I was the one that caught Pinkman’s other project for him. Man, you have no idea what it took! Pinkman said this one has spoken of his living testimonial being you. Is that what he said? Over.”

“Yes, he did say that to me. Over.”

“Oh, no! Pinkman says that this somehow ties your soul to this creature. You are his chosen one. Over.”

“I don’t know exactly what the creature meant by that. Over,” Rick replied.

“Well, we’re going to find out. Over and out,” the sergeant said as he laid down the microphone of the radio and went back to work on his ground radar unit. “Time is of the essence now,” he said to himself as he blindly hooked up another wire to the radar by memory. “The full moon will be upon us soon. The reaper loves overly patient men in a situation like this.”

Overhearing the sergeant’s overtones his foxhole buddy whispered to him over the short distance, “Why, Sergeant Placer, are all of the all-terrain vehicles facing inward? Would you mind telling me something?”

To this Sergeant Placer responded, “I figure he will go for the cabin. Knowing the other one like I do, I figure this one is gonna want some of us first. Do you get it, Private?”

“Well, sir, our company totally surrounds the cabin. That thing would be dead long before it got inside, wouldn’t it?”

“Hah!” the stocky sergeant replied. “Man, this is gonna be a free-for-all time. All I got to say is watch your rear end if you like it in one piece because this is one bad, very seriously bad, element and he’s not coming around to play spades. This guy is hungry. Look, Private, your bullets are only gonna make this boy angry and the only thing that is

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gonna get you out of here is a fistful of Irish luck and a lot of good sense and I see that you are not Irish! Look, until we get another Hell's Pit built out here your best bet is that steel netting hanging over there which is controlled by this hand-held trigger. When the time is right I'm gonna drop it and hopefully it might hold. See those chains over there? Once the net is on him we're gonna grab those and try to restrain the bad boy but good. Men will surely die when he shows up to fight, I can guarantee you that, but if you listen to me then you might have a fighting chance tonight, boy. Shut up now and pray to your maker. Boy, could we use some luck!"

"Well, what are these lead helmets for, Sarge? They weigh a ton."

The sergeant shuffled his feet and then stopped. "That wolf creature's gonna mess with your head if you don't have the helmet on at all times, you hear? Put it on now and that's an order!" This reminded the sergeant to advise the others to do the same so he grabbed a nearby PA and blurted out to the whole company, "HELMETS ON! I REPEAT, HELMETS ON! AND THEY STAY THAT WAY UNTIL I TELL ALL OF YOU TO TAKE THEM OFF!" The microphone screeched as he belted out the announcement. "Ladies, those beautiful ESP helmets may look like a chunk of meteorite just landed on your head but it's all we got for now," he said to them and then laid the PA back down.

"Did you use Pinkman's meteor helmets on the last capture, Sergeant?" the private questioned him further.

"You darned right we did and I'd bet my lunch on those helmets. This one I got saved my life once already. Now, strap it up, Private, good and tight," Sergeant Placer directed. "We already lost three men because of loose straps. I seen it with my own two eyes. Enough, Private. I got so much to do right now I ain't got time to scratch my own butt and I'm here talking to your rookie hide."

The soldiers were having a rough time of it setting up their foxhole radar towers that night. Even though they shared the luxury of having a three-quarter moon that was also a problem. Right at the stroke of midnight a phenomenal voice came over the sergeant's radio. It sounded weak but it was definitely there.

"Oh, no, those crazy hillbillies over the hill. They are playing with

their CB sets. Private Brooks, go up to that beat-up shack over there and tell those misfits to cool it or we'll unload a mortar on their heads, and tell them no fooling around, and I surely well mean it, too!"

"Ah, yes, sir," said the private from two fox holes down as he climbed out of his hole and disappeared into the night towards the hillbilly shack never to return.

Morning came and on the lush mountain scape many piles of green hardware lay scattered about. The scene looked normal enough and gave no clue that anything unusual had happened the night before. The voice of Sergeant Placer filled the encampment as he was the first one up. "All right, Ladies, let's get up," he said to his men over the PA. "UP! UP! UP! YOU WHINNIES!"

Soon the portable mess hall began to release steam into the crisp morning air and the smell of pancakes cooking stirred interest throughout the encampment. Professor Pinkman entered the head sergeant's tent area. The unmistakable sound of whisky bottles clanging in his trench coat pockets announced his arrival to Sergeant Placer.

"Yes, Pinkman," Placer called out to the professor from his tent before he actually saw him. "What can I do for you now?"

"Oh, Sarge. I just came over to sneak some of those sweet smelling flap jacks that I figure are this moment just about ready."

"Okay! Yeah!" said the sergeant emerging from his tent. "Go ahead, eat your fill or until you bloat from them," he said, at which both men laughed together.

"You know, Sarge," the professor said, this time in a serious tone, "I overheard the men talking that you're missing a private already."

"Yep!" was all that escaped from the sergeant's tight lips.

"Let's see," Pinkman mused. "You sent him out on a mission and he never came back. Is that right?"

"Yep!" Placer replied. "I got a team investigating it right now. Over on the western quadrant one of the men claims that something real odorous urinated in his helmet while he slept. Dirty rat should have had the thing on is all I have to say about that."

"They are heavy," Pinkman said, stating the obvious, "but you're right. He definitely should have had the thing on."

"He's lucky!" broke in the sarge. "If I'd caught him not wearing it

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I'd have done my business in the helmet and then would have court-marshaled him."

Just as the sarge was grabbing for some more butter a speck of light from something coming up the road caught his attention. "Reporters," he grumbled. "Got to be. No one else would have the guts to come up here right now." Both he and the professor deserted what was left of breakfast and strode out to the road where a string of cars was beginning to line up. "All right, Fellas, what's going on here? Ah, let me guess. You've heard that there's a good story up here and you've come to investigate."

The driver of the leading car got out and approached him saying, "No, Sarge, we have all come up here to get the story that we have already verified from one of yours. "Come on, Sergeant Placer, it's the story of the century."

The sergeant, displeased by their presence, reluctantly gave in, "You'll all have to sign waiver forms before you're allowed up here, you got it?"

"Okay, Sarge," the reporter said. "My team has no problems with waiver forms."

Sergeant Placer then called in his second in command saying to him so that all could hear, "Sergeant, take these rookies and park their stinky hides over on that hill. If one of them interferes with due process go ahead and open fire. YOU GOT THAT?"

"Relax," one of the reporters spoke out. "There will be no trouble."

"Yeah! I got a plan for you already. This time you're in some deep stuff, boys."

"Hah, hah!" all of them laughed but the sarge.

Pinkman followed the sarge until he turned around to him and said, "Pinky, I've got things to do, man. What else do you want?"

"Oh, nothing, Sergeant. I'll go back to the cabin. I'll be there if you need me." The bottles clinked again as Pinkman walked away nervously.

The rest of the day was filled with construction of all kinds. The Army hauled in a huge concrete tank. It took a crane to get the thing set properly. Brick masons from the Army Corp of Engineers were on the scene. That part of the mountain resembled a typical city operation.

Even temporary lighting was set in place.

“You’re going to have to face this!” Pinkman now back at the cabin said to Rick. “The only way that I know of to lure the creature even near the concrete tank is to use you as bait. You are our only card, Rick. Without your assistance it’s very doubtful that we can be successful. The sarge has a plan. He wants to strap you into a motorized barber’s chair and withhold the use of a meteorite helmet on you so the creature can sense you, and all the while your mind will be luring him in for capture. It’s the only way!”

“Pinkman, you’re insane if you think I’m going to get involved with this crazy scheme. No way!”

“If you don’t,” Pinkman responded, “then I can’t guarantee you freedom later on from the monster. You know he will always find you, don’t you? Somehow he’ll haunt you forever, even in your dreams, which Darla says are quite prolific.”

“Shut up about the dreams!” Rick retorted. It seemed Pinkman had hit a nerve. “You have no conception, Pinkman. Don’t mention them again!”

“Okay, Sonny Boy, but you’d better make your mind up quick. You know it won’t be long till we have to make our move and they are going to have to have someone for the chair.”

“Pinky, give me one of those vodka bottles, and it better be full, darn it. Save a bunch of those cigarettes, too. I’ll need them all for this one.”

“Okay! I’ll save it all for you. We’ll both get tanked up and will try to live through it all, conscious or unconscious.”

The last night of the third-quarter phase of the lunar cycle slowly passed. The oncoming brightness of an early morning dawn in the month of February had yet to break over the western threshold of the planet Mystic thereby bringing on the full moon phase. The cabin stood up from the ground and upon it lingered a few velvety shadows and as the black shadows of the night slowly crawled from the face of the planet so did the darkness that clung to the cabin’s exterior. Now only a few patches of the darkness remained under the eaves and overhang of the high mountain structure. A light mist arose from the soil and scattered above its timbers as the morning frost gave way to the heat of

the rising sun.

The sounds of morning hardware being shuffled about came from the cabin's interior. "Bang, clang, sizzle." The sweet smell of fresh bacon filled the area as Darla prepared breakfast upon the kitchen range. Darla stood watching as Pinkman's nose twitched as the smell of the bacon became stronger. She found the sight to be comical and snickered to herself quietly.

The young boy James by now would have had the place moving but he'd been sent to boarding school down in the city so the place seemed a little too quiet for her.

"Ah!" one of the men bellowed out loud, the sound filling the kitchen. There stood Rick behind Darla. He was half-dressed, his shirt barely tucked in. "Good morning," he mumbled and then went directly to the coffee maker. He loaded the percolator to the brim spilling fresh grounds of Folgers coffee recklessly.

Rick then spoke again saying, "This will be the second full cycle and the second phase of the second month of the second year of the second millennium since our transformation from the other side. When Rideon spoke to me up on the trail he said I was to be his living testimonial subject but he never took the time to explain the full meaning of living testimonial to me."

"I have no idea what he meant either," replied Darla.

"One thing is for sure," Rick interjected, his voice starting to quiver as he took a sip of morning brew, "we are going to find out very soon. Last night when the soldiers were carrying the chair up the trail I overheard one saying that I was to be blindfolded and strapped into the chair for the duration of the capture."

Pinkman still lying on the couch broke into the conversation from across the room, "You are not fully returned to this time line and your nightmares are evidence of this. If Rideon kills you during a full moon phase then he can stay in this time line and for three days out of a month he can live as a normal citizen. His change time from man to wolfen will be painless and very quick. I have personally watched our captured wolfen Voil transform and it sometimes took almost a complete week from beginning to end. You," spoke Pinkman softly, "have never fully returned to this time line nor will you ever be here mentally one hundred

percent. The truth of this seeps out from your nightmares. Both you and Rideon are stuck in the vortex of this world and the other. He can escape by killing you in this time line. You cannot. If we can capture Rideon without him killing you and contain him in Hell's Pit then your life can continue on until you're an old man. Containment is everything now and you must cooperate by doing everything you are told to do."

"Okay," said Rick resignedly. "I'll cooperate with whatever you want me to do."

Pinkman seeming satisfied with Rick's response then drifted back into sleep.

Meanwhile Rick charmed Darla. "You're as lovely as a flower," he said to her. "Even a rose could not approach your beauty. Do you know this?" he asked of her.

"No, I don't," she replied, "but you make me feel that way."

Then he said to her, "You know that I will love you forever and that no matter what happens to me I will always feel that way inside my heart."

Once again she looked at him and said, "Nothing is going to happen to you, Rick. Try not to worry," she said softly. "I'm sure everyone is going to do his best to stop Rideon."

By now Rick was so filled with fear and emotions that he retreated to the front porch pulling the front door fast behind him so no one could see his face. He pulled a warm blanket from the porch shelf as a cool breeze drifted into the area. He sat swinging upon the porch swing as faded memories re-emerged into his mind. "I used to be a happy man," he thought to himself. "I was never one to wish harm towards anyone or anything but look at me now. This new turn of events has squeezed about every ounce of youth out of me. I am angry and my mind is made up. I will do whatever is required of me." As he sat in the swing with the warm blanket wrapped around him trying to regain some measure of sanity and reason he drifted off to sleep land.

As he had just started to snore a small bank of US Army soldiers who had been marching down the trail flanked the house. "All men halt!" one of them shouted. "Left face! At ease!" At this Rick's eyes opened to the sight of about thirty young men in rows of four and all the soldiers were staring right into the porch at him. "These soldiers," said

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the commanding officer, “have been assigned to this area. These men are my finest and they will guard your home area. Men, fall out!” screamed the buck sergeant and all the men complied and began to set up perimeter boundaries in the yard close enough to the house they thought so as to be effective. The three-striped buck sergeant approached Rick again stating that he wanted all the civilians to stay within the confines of the house until further notice and his tone told Rick he would not appreciate any argument to the contrary so Rick kept quiet and just sat by watching the sequence of events unfold.

Meanwhile the US Army Corp of Engineers had been busy further up the trail. Loud sounds were coming from the large bulldozers and the crane that were to set Hell’s Pit into place but louder still were the yells of the men which echoed through the once peaceful countryside. It was still morning and the soldiers had many things to do. They had to assemble the concrete trap correctly and in a timely fashion to assure that it would function properly. The barber’s swivel chair had been installed into the pit late during the previous night and it had already been tested and had checked out fine. It rotated upon a metal post and was about four feet from the concrete floor. It had been placed in a separate part of the pit and was about two feet away from the steel curtain which everybody hoped would be invisible to Rideon. A black steel curtain would be incredibly difficult to see after dark, even for a wolf creature. There would be no escape for Rideon once he was lured inside from above. The bottom of the pit would drop down twenty feet and simultaneously the lid would also drop sealing him in. Next a very brave soldier who had volunteered for the mission would raise the trap door to the floor’s hatchway then climb down a small ladder and finally would unstrap Rick from the chair enabling both of them to escape hopefully unharmed. At this stage of the game there would be no time for “trial and error” improvements. It would be “grin and bear it” time.

Meanwhile the professor and Darla were talking inside the house and Rick decided to rejoin them. When Rick entered the front room, the conversation momentarily stopped until Pinkman spoke up. “Rick,” he said, “I think one of the soldiers was trying to reach you. He said it could wait awhile so I let the matter rest while you were out on the porch napping. He said that he would be out back digging in. He’s that

muscular fellow with the stripes on his sleeve, you know.”

Upon receiving that information Rick went out back to meet the man. “Yeah, what can I do for you?” spoke Rick.

“Well,” he replied, “we’re thinking of taking Darla out of here for her own safety. You know how women are. They can get hurt easily. We’re going to send a jeep for her in just a few minutes. She’ll be put up in the Holiday Inn close by reserve headquarters. What do you think, sir?” asked the sergeant.

“Take Ted, too,” Rick immediately responded. “I wouldn’t want anyone getting hurt.”

“Okay, Mr. Allen. We’ll proceed. Oh! Another thing that I’ve been thinking about. Well, I just want to get it off my chest, okay? Forever,” said the smart-mouthed sergeant, “may not be such a long time and I think it’s all in the way a person looks at it, don’t you, Mr. Allen?”

Rick gave the man a very long and sour look and turning around he then retreated to his house somehow feeling a little less confident than he had a short moment ago. At least he felt that the love of his life would be safe although separated from his side and knew he could fight stronger this way.

A few hours later a husky soldier appeared at the rear entrance of the house and spoke loudly, “Mr. Allen, are you ready? The night is almost here and my orders are to escort you up the trail and Professor Pinkman as well.” Not getting an immediate response the soldier spoke even louder this time, “Mr. Allen, are you ready?”

Gathering his resolve Rick responded, “Okay, let’s go for it.”

Saying nothing the professor grabbed his coat and closely followed the two men out of the doorway.

“Clang, clang,” went the sound of shovel heads hitting rocks buried in the soldiers’ foxhole floors as the three brave men walked up through the fortified gauntlet towards the pit of Hell. Men’s heads were popping up and down and each man desperately dug to his own custom depth thereby affording greater maneuverability.

“I have yet to meet a clean-mouthed soldier,” declared Pinkman as he trailed the other two men. Hearing that remark the whole place erupted in a brief moment of humor.

“You men shut up!” shouted the sergeant who couldn’t keep a smile

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from his lips. “Mr. Allen, are you ready for war?” the young sergeant asked as the three men reached the top of the hillside.

Rick failed to respond as he stood glaring at the concrete edifice for a short while. Out of the corner of his eye he could see a loader that had just finished dumping its last load of dirt nearby. The driver stood up in clear view and yelled to the sergeant, “I’m out of here!” Then the diesel engine revved loudly and the carriage of iron rolled down the embankment towards civilization.

“He was the last of the engineers?” questioned the professor.

“Yes,” responded the sergeant.

Just then First Sergeant Placer arrived in a jeep. He had been cussing out the driver but stopped when he saw Rick and Pinkman. “Why, hello, boys. Are you ready for some excitement? Hey!” yelled the first sergeant calling for Rick’s attention specifically. “That pit will hold anything known or unknown to mankind.”

Rick replied saying, “Have you forgotten Pinkman’s videos?”

“Of course I haven’t!” Sergeant Placer returned. Pinky says that thing is going to pound on the walls for seven nights. Well, that’s okay, son. We put the thickest rebar in those concrete walls and all the way through it is the strongest concrete known to humanity. It’ll hold up!”

“Hell’s Pit” was the name that First Sergeant Placer officially gave to the concrete structure. It looked evil to all of the men. They spoke about it in a guarded tone of voice. Each man knew that soon it might contain something far more sinister than a mere imaginary figure.

The first sergeant yelled to Rick and all of the other men, “If you men value your lives you’ll keep your distance from this pit after tonight,” and the men sensed that he meant every word.

Twilight was nearing its end. Up above the Mystic was softly lit by its sister terrestrial body the full moon which now clung to the sky. On this night all of the soldiers were completely dug into the mountainside and were making final preparations for war with the creature. The men with shovels were turning the soil in front of each foxhole in an effort to scatter their scents so as not to give a hurried werewolf a single location of one of the soldiers. An easy find could mean quick death.

After awhile it seemed as though the nighttime existed for the sake of silence as each man listened carefully through his respective device

that was made to enhance even the slightest sound from a long distance away. The first sergeant came on the headpiece radio set which gave him direct contact with each soldier. He ordered, "Move only if you have to! No cigarette smoking! And above all, wear your lead ESP helmets! Lock and load! And be silent or else you'll give us all away!" Then the sergeant reminded everyone of the human body part that he would personally remove from them if someone slipped up. "This one's not getting away!" the first sergeant declared as he clicked off of the radio set.

Just about then a white-tailed deer from higher up on the trail had meandered down to where the men were prepared for major conflict. The men were aware of the deer's encroachment but quite unaware of the creature's species as its silhouette was shielded by the thickets in the extreme area. "Crack, crack," was the sound of pine branches snapping under the weight of the animal. This sound created quite a stir amongst the soldiers.

The first sergeant came back on the radio ordering, "Shoot it!"

"Pop, pop, pop," and many rounds of bullet ammunition were unleashed into the unsuspecting forest creature. "Thud, thud, thud," and the soldiers knew that something had been hit by the bullets.

"Stop fire! Stop fire!" the sergeant then commanded. "Hold your fire, men," he said in a lower tone as the white streaks of tracer bullet light discontinued. "Maintain your stations, men," he then commanded. "With my night scope I can see it better now. It was a freakin' deer that was shot," he said as he rested the pair of night binoculars onto a leather strap that hung from his neck. He grabbed them up again and peered over to where the fallen deer lay dead dripping blood onto the forest floor. The others stood watching from their foxholes as the glowing red silhouette let go with a sudden surge of after-life motion surprising everyone.

Over the headset came the voice of one of the privates, "We can use it as bait. The smell will bring him in."

"Ah, let it lay," replied the sarge. "And you shut up, whoever that was," he bellered into the headset and then there was silence among the troop and once again the darkness that concealed the men also seemed to swallow the forest and countryside as well.

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After a short while the radar-controlling private in the next foxhole down from the sarge screamed out, “There’s motion on the far western flank, Sarge! Darn it, is this thing moving quickly, Sarge! I’ve never seen anything move through the forest terrain like this. I’ve never seen any of nature’s creatures move with that much stealth.”

The sergeant then yelled loudly to the private that was assigned to stand by Rick and Pinkman in the adjacent foxhole, “Get Mr. Allen into that rotating chair and I mean pronto!”

The volunteer private firmly grabbed Rick by the arm and quickly led him to the mouth of the concrete pit. Using the strap-on night vision they easily maneuvered the complicated terrain afoot. In just seconds the private had Rick blindfolded and squirming against the velcro restraints that now bound him. Only his right arm was allowed freedom to operate the swivel stick. Anxiously the private spoke into Rick’s face saying to the living testimonial human being, “Heaven help you, Mr. Allen. I prayed for you already this morning.” Then the volunteer private turned and disappeared through the opening in the pit’s floor sealing the hatch from below and activating the black steel curtain as well.

“Bang!” the iron curtain hammered into place. The trap was armed thereby separating Rick’s chamber from the trap chamber. The final sound of the steel curtain connecting with the latches of the concrete floor jack-hammered the deepest sense of fear into Rick’s mind causing his blood to flood through his veins and sweat to pour from every orifice in his body. He knew that his life depended upon the raw courage of the volunteer private. The meaning of the retreating private’s last words echoed through the corridors of Rick’s nervous mind but the words were quickly drowned out by the sounds of small rifle fire outside.

“Nothing can move like that!” Rick overheard one of the outside men yelling loudly as the rifle fire immediately intensified. Next came a loud scream from far, far away that Rick knew he would never forget. The voice sounded like that of an extremely frightened man perhaps heaving out his last breath of air, all the while trying to vocalize what was killing him.

Meanwhile outside Pinkman had managed to maneuver over to Sergeant Placer’s foxhole and was now crouched down and watching

over the crust of the hole. He was yelling intensely to all of the men, “Keep your helmets on! Some mortar fire over there! Over there!” but his words seemed to have little meaning to the far western platoon.

“Shut up!” the sarge yelled into Pinkman’s face and the radio clicked again.

Then a voice said, “This is Ranger #4, Sarge!” The frightened voice lowered immediately and then the lonely private whispered into the field unit as if he wanted no one nearby to hear his words, “The creature has been having a heyday on this end, Sarge. He got our radio tower first and then started climbing into the foxholes with our men. I have never seen anything to compare with its killing abilities. It’s almost instantaneous the way he goes about it. Eight are counted dead and there’s four left with two extremely wounded. The creature moves so fast and before you know it that horrible thing is killing you! Somehow he bleeps out our portable radar units just at the right moment! This is Hell! I’m firing my weapon now but it is having no effect! Good God help me now! Ah! Ah! Ah!”

“Ranger #4, come back! Ranger #4, come in!” Sergeant Placer answered but there was no reply. Nothing! “Give me a count!” ordered the first sergeant. “Now!”

“1,2,3,4,5,.....” the men sounded off on and on until the last man had called out his number.

“Thirty-six men, sir,” spoke the highest corporal, “out of forty-eight! Ranger #3, come in! Over!”

“Yes, sir, Ranger #3,” was the immediate response.

“Ranger #3. This is the first sergeant. Activate your laser barriers immediately! Over! Oh, and shorten your radar zone to Level 3. Over!”

“Affirmative, sir!” he again responded. “Over!”

“Over and out, corporal!” said the sarge. He then turned to the professor. “Pinkman,” the sarge spoke, “we now have twelve dead. Do you have any suggestions?”

“No,” said the professor shaking his head back and forth.

There was a brief moment of calm before Zone 3 interrupted, “Sarge! We have motion on our western flank,” the corporal reported back. “Blip, blip,” the corporal’s portable radar screen went, and again,

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“blip, blip.” He smacked it with his fist and the screen went black. “You dirty -----!” Then he grabbed his M-16 and started firing at the location last identified. “Shoot at anything that moves, all you men!”

“Stop firing!” one of the nearby privates yelled from his foxhole. “It’s one of ours! It appears that Rideon has placed one member of Platoon 16 over there!” yelled the private as he gleamed his flash of light into the tree which held the lifeless body left hanging from a lowly branch.

“Ah! Just fine,” thought Rideon to himself. “They took my bait.” Already inside their perimeter and sneaking behind a nearby chaparral he was close enough, he thought, to provide for a full frontal attack on Zone 3. With the strength of fifty men he grabbed the first soldier by the neck and separated the man’s head from his body. He then grabbed the dead man’s helmet and cast it into another’s foxhole. It shattered like a grenade going off, killing all the inhabitants. He then dove into the corporal’s foxhole and shredded the young man from head to toe in a few short seconds and then grabbed his helmet and threw it down the line decapitating three more until the object went off course and slammed into the whole company’s portable radar tower. “Ah! Nice shot!” Rideon commended himself as he jumped out of the foxhole and into another.

By now the men were scattering everywhere. Most had abandoned their weapons and were heading for the nearby forest as quickly as they could get there. The werewolf concentrated on one man before reaching the sergeant’s foxhole. He took the time to sever the fallen man’s head from his body and then holding the man’s head as if he held a rare delicacy in his claws he sucked the human’s brains out without missing a single drop. “Burp! Y’all come back, now!” he yelled with his blood drenched mouth towards the escaping men.

The killing field was empty now except for two remaining humans. The brave first sergeant had stuck it out knowing that more than likely he had seen his last day on the planet. The other human that lay at the sergeant’s feet shivering like a pine needle in the wind was Pinkman! The first sergeant couldn’t hold the anger he was feeling in and yelled out to the creature. “You pathetic piece of cow hide!” he bellowed out and then emptied his M-16 clip but missed Rideon as he ran out of

shells.

“Ah, someone beckons Rideon tonight!” the beast verbalized loudly through all the saliva which was by now dripping everywhere, “slop, slop.”

“Come on, you!” yelled the brave man as he climbed out of his foxhole and quickly ran to the mouth of Hell’s Pit and immediately turned facing his greatest fear because Rideon was now only five feet away and standing larger than any nightmare illusion ever could. The first sergeant while shaking his fist at the tower of doom yelled out loudly, “Come on, come on!” but the creature would not budge.

Finally the sergeant’s body sank into itself as he faced off the werewolf near the mouth of Hell’s Pit and the creature spoke to him in the most ridiculing way, “Rideon likes to play big murder games, but your boys ran away just when Rideon was starting to enjoy himself. Now Rideon KNOWS what the sergeant is hiding in the underground root cellar, and Rideon wants you to come see, too!”

“No! No!” screamed the first sergeant as he was backed closer to the mouth of Hell’s Pit by Rideon pushing on and on.

“Down, down we go,” spoke the killer as he grabbed the sarge’s coat collar and pulled him kicking and thrashing about and then sank into the opening like he was stepping into the doorway of a fine diner with his best friend in tow. “Resisting again? Huh, son?” he yelled at the frightened man. “I’ll teach you!” the great wolfman said just before laying his hairy paw across Placer’s head. “Thunk!” A chunk of the man’s cranium hit the ground and then he threw the unconscious man back out of the opening. “Ah, where is my prize?” the creature spoke just before hitting the trap floor. “Crack!” the floor gave way to the incredible weight of the werewolf and down the floor sank twenty feet to the lower level. Above it all a catastrophic sound was released into the chamber as the concrete lid slammed down sealing all of the captives from the outside world.

When Rideon hit the concrete floor he barely received a scratch but to vent his anger at the incident he swore out an oath at the sergeant whom he’d knocked completely unconscious and left to die outside. Then the angry wolfman belted out into the darkness of the cellar, “My eyes have not adjusted yet!. Believe me, I know that there is at least

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one of you in here with me and as soon as my lovely eyes readjust, well then I'll see to it that at least one of you fellows will get some of my special attention!" After saying that he began raking the floor with his long sharp claws to further edge them. "Rip, rip," was the sound of claw meeting concrete as Rideon seemed to be preparing for a fine dining experience. "It appears that the boys have done their homework this time," he said almost too quietly as if he had already figured a way out and was subtly considering it. "Oh, Rick! I noticed you on my unpleasant trip to the bottom of this concrete root cellar."

Rick who was still restrained by the rotating chair and was struggling against the straps had by now reached the point of utter terror but refused to utter a single word. Instead he delved into intense concentration. "The werewolf may be powerful enough to break through the iron curtain and maybe even then kill me but one thing's for sure, he isn't going to enjoy it," he thought to himself inside his deepest possible concentration level. At this moment Rick's tremendous dislike for the creature was even stronger than his intense fear of it so rather than gratify the creature by responding to him Rick decided to hold his tongue.

Suddenly, a loud "clunk" broke the silence and for a moment changed the atmosphere in the upper and lower chambers. Then there was a "Creak, screech," and finally a "thunk!" as a heavy concrete lid crashing down onto the floor resounded throughout the area and then the moment's calm was broken by the sound of boot leather striking the floor in the form of fast paces. "Rick, are you all right?" spoke a voice from a short distance away.

"Yes," said Rick immediately. "Get me out of this darned thing and would you please hurry?"

"Okay, I'm trying just as fast as I can," said the soldier as he finished removing all the restraints that had bound the once captured man.

"Oh, Ricky!" came a voice from down below. "You forgot one little thing!" The beast had noticed that the soldier had forgotten his helmet. "Hah, hah! Don't you boys remember I have thoughts of my own?" and instantly the wolfman began breathing heavily as he concentrated his powerful mind towards the volunteer soldier still in the upper level. The soldier most certainly had been overtaken by the ESP powers of the

beast because he now grabbed Rick by the throat and began choking him with his powerful hands. Rick was getting weak as the soldier was a very strong young man and in very good condition, so strong that he almost lifted Rick off the ground. The older and weaker Rick with his helmet still on although half-cocked on his head finally gave the soldier a strapping head butt with the lead helmet, cold-cocking the young volunteer with such force that his legs gave way from the blow and he fell to the ground.

Rick may have been quick enough to cool off the soldier but Rideon was much faster. He was already at the top of his chamber and was hanging from the steel curtain with his big yellow eyeballs glaring in at the action that just finished. He reached in through the thick bars of the iron curtain and slashed Rick's backside tearing away part of the man's pectoral. Rick let out a blood-curdling scream that could only mean intense pain to another listening human in the area. As he fell to the floor Rideon reached into the chamber grabbing for him but missing a the bleeding man. Rideon began yelling loudly while rocking against the unbreakable bars of the curtain and all the while Rick was slowly dragging the unconscious soldier's body nearer and nearer the doorway chamber. To Rick it seemed that he was pulling the weight of fifty men under this stress but he did not give up and finally with "come hell or high water" determination got his man to safety.

It was the doorway of ultimate glory for Rick. Nothing could be sweeter than escaping from this moment. Rideon was so horribly frightening and it seemed to Rick that Rideon had escaped from hell for this one special moment to be with him. He finally got the volunteer soldier out of the small cavity that his fellow soldiers had made for them much earlier in the day.

Later on all the men began to regroup around the pit. Most of the survivors were just young men and subject to spells of over-anxious behavior, their blood still pumping on super-drive as the perimeter around the concrete pit boiled with nervous activities. Rick had regained his composure by now and had retreated to the comfort of the mess tent. It was one of the few things left standing in the area and Professor Pinkman soon joined him there. "What are we going to do now?" was Rick's question to the old man. "Are you going to keep the

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creature for study perhaps? Surely he must be kept in containment for as long as he is alive.

“Oh, yes!” the old professor replied. “We could never allow something like that thing down there in the trap to be free. That, my young friend, would be a crime against all of humanity!”

“What about the wounded soldiers,... and, uhh, the dead ones? They hauled them away quickly but the reporters got plenty of pictures. You know the public is sure to find out about all of this.”

“Yes! They surely will!” Pinkman conceded.

“You know that they also took some pretty revealing photographs last night of the live action while everybody was moving around trying to stay in one piece,” Rick went on to say to the calm looking but uncomfortable old professor. “You cannot hide this, don’t you know! Maybe even the President will come to see your prizes and then they will surely take them away from you, sir! You know if they don’t already have someone up here I’ll bet they’ll have somebody up here spying on you in no time. Those reporter types were on the phone before, during and after the event. Previously it was all disbelief in everyone’s minds that such a thing as this monster really existed so the press sent out only rookies to the scene but those same apprentice reporters are all going to have some pretty hard evidence. It’s just plain obvious that you’re not going to be able to hide those creatures anymore, especially Rideon.”

“Well, son,” the professor spoke up. “Maybe they will take them and maybe they won’t! You see, I have a plan that nobody knows about.”

At this time the conversation ended as Rick grew tired and started back towards the cabin leaving Pinkman and the tent behind forever! Rick had a gut feeling that this was the last time he’d see the professor alive. It was just a strange feeling that he had but couldn’t explain.

The years rolled by and the world changed in many ways as everyone grew older. Darla’s son James grew up and went off to college seeking a degree in journalism but eventually joining the Foreign Legion, and then he went on to fight as a mercenary somewhere in China. Darla, bless her soul, died in a car crash and is now with God.

After Darla's death Rick became a solitary kind of individual, simply preferring to carry on alone in the world. He still received letters from Ned periodically but seldom visited him anymore. It was such a difficult journey up above the timber line and there was still no fast or easy access to that part of the higher country. Ned had aged well and was still in good health, thank the Lord! Maybe the fresh air up there had kept him that way. The world moved at a much faster pace and in order to stay up with it spare hours were hard to find and in most cases had to be stolen.

Sometimes Rick wondered about Rideon and what might have become of him at this later stage in time. During all the years since his capture he'd heard nothing about him. It was almost as though there had once been a ghost that had walked the Mystic and then had vanished into thin air but something had reminded him that Rideon had a style of his very own. Somehow he knew that one day Rideon would come back for him and the others! And he would in a very strange way as yet unknown to Rick.

CHAPTER 9

Years later the city's newspaper read: "The Mystic's planetary ozone layer has now become completely exhausted in many places and in the ozone layers that remain there are great gaping holes! Some of the world's greatest scientists have made erroneous claims and charges are being filed!"

A team of retired astronautical engineers had been on a tour one fine day at one of the planet's Zonerator plants and this particular plant had been of great interest to them because it lay in a western state where pollution levels were known to be extremely high. That's when the malfunction evidenced by the emissions from the tremendous stack leading out of the plant was discovered. Apparently some of the top plant operators had been aware of this but threatened to secrecy. Their claim was that they had been forced by the plant owners to deceive the public for many years by providing untruthful annual reports. At many of the compound-product-creating plants across the nation the machine

called the great Zonerator was still in operation because of the plant's owners' claims that the Zonerators would somehow restore the protective layer of gases that once formed part of Mystic's depleted atmosphere. The supposedly perfect Zonerator was a machine that had been created by mankind in order to combine together certain basic elements native to the planet Mystic with those from the hard-to-get Mars asteroids. These heavy elements had been retrieved from orbital space but the truth that had been concealed from the public was that these elements simply did not compound well enough with the Mystic's elements to reverse the process so now in certain geographical locations the surface of the great planet Mystic was sizzling with very dangerous levels of unfiltered ultraviolet radiation while certain other locations due to cloud cover or perhaps just plain luck had remained habitable.

Rick managed to look up into the burning sky seeking out an image with his eyes as a supersonic jet split the lower shell of the atmosphere above and created a sonic boom. By shielding his eyes from the intense brightness with his arms and then using a crack in his hand that he made by separating two of his fingers slightly he managed to look up above the horizon where the sun hung maliciously in the zenith but off to one side from his location. Midday had finally arrived for this peculiar little mountain town which lay safely nestled away very comfortably from the rest of the world. Surrounded by large timber pine and Douglas fir trees the valley was filled with fallen branches that seemed to pile up far away from the occupied homes in the countryside. Way up high in the Rocky Mountains was the best place to be because much lower down on the flat plains it was very hot and much more dangerous. Down there without a protective layer of clothing to fend off the blistering sunlight a man would burn up and be dead in a short period of time. These were hard times and until a miracle befell all of humanity the outlook appeared to be seriously grim for all.

On this particular day Rick was driving back home from the city on his old Harley-Davidson and following a two-lane highway up into the high forested mountains when out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of the bunch of tremendous antiquated crop growing domes he'd seen many times before and had often times wondered about. "Such a mysterious sight!" he thought as he began to subconsciously fantasize

about the old relics. They were large single-story buildings, very tall and yet half-broken with loose pieces hanging down from their ceilings. Just the sight of them brought back memories of a much better time in his life. As a boy he had once played outside the crop domes while the immigrant workers tended the soil from inside. Many years ago the domes had been fully covered in plastic material and had functioned quite well for the farmers and had furthermore provided jobs and food for many people but now they just sat off to one side of the highway, empty and useless. They had fallen into a state of disgrace now and seemed to be reaching for the ocean of tears in the clouds as if nearing a final collapse one day soon. Their rounded historic steel turns that had once been molded into shape by a massive economic machine had over the passing of the years lost their plastic coverings. These emptied vessels appeared lonely for food plants to grow inside them and ultimately seemed to be longing for a meaning to exist. The good dreams of many true-hearted men had built and fashioned these dying edifices but their dreams had ultimately been diminished by a half-caring government and were long gone into yesterday's past as half of today's world hungered for food. Upward mobility had long since vanished for the living and the crop-growing domes as well.

Rick remembered the earlier years so different from now when people really cared for one another. Growing food inside of the vessels now would only be a shot in the dark. Against the thievery that would occur early on the crops would most certainly be left to wither away in the scorching sun. The odds were long against such a foolish experiment and Rick could not help recalling when the money had run out for the place. The financial dilemma had plunged the lives of the brilliant scientists into an abyss of desperation so deep that they could not continue working and studying the ever-changing atmosphere and how it affected crop yields. The scientists' families had surely suffered as well. At one point the workers of the place had stopped production after receiving no pay from the head office and everything would have ended at that time had it not been for the efforts of a great woman that had kept the place struggling forward until its last dying breath finally came. To the present day the story about her heroics in not giving up lived on but something had finally happened even to her and to the other

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proprietors that remained with her to work the domes. Maybe they all died from working too hard, who knew! Maybe they had been driven to leave by hunger but only ghosts now remained in that place and people would just not go in there! Rick experienced a strange gut feeling when passing the failure. It aroused a painful memory for him if nothing else because it had once symbolized a way out of poverty and starvation for all of humanity which the world was now facing. "It is now only full of dead dreams and nothing more," Rick thought from a faraway place in his mind as this remnant of the past slowly disappeared from his vision. Bad dreams had replaced every good feeling that he once had for the place. "An emptiness that I now feel," was his last thought about the place as the large eyesore disappeared from his sight along with the outlying fields and valleys which lay nearby the congested black top highway as he drove away upon its almost boiling surface.

At this time there were only a few remaining highways leading anywhere that hadn't been closed down from over-congestion. The mountain road that led to Rick's cabin still remained passable and was still open to the public but as yet only a few still remained passable out in the countryside. Most other highways had become extremely over-congested, suffering from having no maintenance or completely choked down by the many dead or abandoned vehicles that lay stranded upon them. In some places the roads were filled with cars piled ten levels high into vast junk piles that often times would creak in the wind as a person would attempt to maneuver a vehicle through the cluttered mess.

As he stood solemnly looking out at the beautiful countryside that only the mountain regions now allowed for Rick wondered how all of humanity could have permitted things to come to such an end. It was perplexing to him and others how it could be so lush and green up here in the high country and otherwise so parched and dry at the lower elevations where most of the desperate population now resided. Maybe it was because of the security measures that made it hard for others to make it up to the high country. He didn't know for sure.

The end of sane life, or the beginning of a new insane era, really began and became very clear to most citizens when the communities no longer saw the need to keep prisoners behind bars. This came about after the government had preached that new rehabilitation practices had

reached one hundred percentile levels of effectiveness on almost all of the hard-core prisoners in the prison system and then had released each and every one they had selected for rehabilitation after implanting them with markers for permanent identification purposes. The satellite-tracking devices contained magnetic labels inside of them which, after being implanted under their skin or upon their foreheads, could instantly identify each person and his whereabouts. They were designed to be permanent and to last each one of them for a complete life span. The labels could not be removed without releasing a deadly toxin into their systems. It was a chemical compound that only combined and became active upon extraction of the devices. For years this system had worked out just fine as every prior criminal could be tracked using satellite technology. A marked man could be located at any instant within inches on the global grid. Crime almost ended because of the harsh penalties the released criminal would face if he perpetrated another crime. Three strikes and they were executed!

It had worked out so well on the prisoners that the government had gained public support to take it one step further into the implementation of human stamping *en masse*! Stores and shopping malls had scanners built and installed in place of check-out clerks and there were no longer any more check-out lines anywhere. Shoppers simply filled up their carts and left the store with all of their supplies, leaving the scanners to do the rest. The “code” as this was called became popular law and was overwhelmingly voted in by the majority populace almost overnight. Every newborn child automatically received a tracking device at birth but without the adjoining poison cartridges. The rest of the population received its injections from the various hospital and medical wards involved. The “code” was supposed to stop illegal immigration. In order to prevent illegal aliens from living in this country and to deter them from committing other forms of crime as well every new citizen was required to receive an under-the-skin label identifying him as a citizen and also placing him to one county seat location. The public experiment continued on for years and was considered to be very successful by the controlling rich citizens although the fading middle classes did not totally agree as life became more and more miserable for them. Under the complete domination of an increasingly corrupt system

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of government the terror-fearing hierarchy found it easier with each passing day to control every move that a citizen made so that it was extremely hard for an average citizen to move even from one county seat to another. A work pass was required to work even in a nearby county.

Rick was lucky and he knew it because his first permanent residence location was only a mile or so away from a somewhat peaceful little mountain village called Harrison Parkland. His rustic little cabin was very peaceful like no other place in the land! It lay deep in the mountains in a place that some folks had often called “No Man’s Land.” His family heritage included many uncles and cousins in the area and he held many friendships from a very long time before, as far back as grammar school. As a child he’d benefitted from the loyalties these good people had to him and as the old friendships carried over into mature adult relations these loyalties had meant even more. Sometimes it was extremely hard to find work yet through it all these loyal friendships had often times carried the weight for him. Another great fortune that was passed on to him was simply that he had belonged to a caring family that he was always able to count on for support. His mother had been a school teacher and his father, in his eyes at least, had been a saint.

Another very great circumstance for Rick was that he was yielded by birth up here to the higher parts of the country. It was very cool in these mountains during the hot weather months of the year and the winters were mild and somewhat pleasant from autumn on through to the beginning of the spring season. Such a place was rare in the world especially during these times after the “greenhouse effect” had developed and it was a much different place from the cities that existed at the lower elevations. It was hotter and much drier down in the larger cities where suffering came to so many good folks from the burning sunlight each day.

Many had to suffer from the heat but there were other problems that were manifest during the times like the extreme control mechanisms set forth by a corrupt city government, the gangs, or finally just by the extreme congestion of the place. Living around the extreme events and diabolical situations that were bound to happen inside of everyday life

was especially hard for the average citizen. Global catastrophic events had quickly changed life for everybody. Just thinking about the drastic changes that he'd seen happen over a little more than a full decade made Rick feel sick to his stomach and very sad about life in general but for Rick it went even deeper because he knew the anger he felt at life came from a place deep inside of his being. He hated to have pity for the others down below because even that made him feel bad. Every day he just tried to overlook it all because there was nothing about life that he could change for them. He was pretty much like the rest of the people that lived a common life during the years in that anger was always close by.

Getting somewhere on the public highways was difficult. The asphalt-covered roadways that hadn't been closed had been taken over by the army since the big prisoner-release days of the past and furthermore controlled by them using guarded traffic stations. At these control locations it was vital to have one's paper work in perfect order beforehand. If a person's control ID tag or paper work did not allow for clearance through the control center then a computer message would come up on the screen: "ILLEGAL ENTRY ATTEMPT--MANDATORY ARREST!" There were no exceptions to the rule and the guards seldom looked for any possible exception to the rule anyway even if they could. The control center guards were unusually cruel and hurried most times and many panicked people had been mysteriously killed while trying to escape from the control center guards. It was very hard to outrun the bullets fired out of an M-16 rifle especially at close range. Rick had lost so many good friends to the control stations that he was running out of fingers on which to count them. Just one month ago a life long buddy named Danny had mysteriously gone down from their bullets while trying to get through the gates. Control center deaths seemed to be on the rise for some reason or another.

It was even harder living inside the city's realm. Life was tough on the inside and when people tried to get away by sneaking through the borders for a breath of fresh country air without the correct forms or tags it usually meant death to them. Even to get away with a simple walk out on the streets without prior permission from a computer bank could be deadly. Some people were still very old-fashioned and not

altogether comfortable with their home computers and sometimes they would even forget to log out of their home using their own personal computer with which to file a report before leaving for work. This would usually prove to be a fatal error on their part as most who had done this had never returned home again. The Agency wanted to have a log for every event in a person's life and their satellites allowed for no discrepancies. Many violators would come and go to a regular location until one day the security men would be there for them and would show them no mercy.

Rick wound his motorcycle engine up to a high rate of revolution as he finally made it to Harrison Parkway and then rolled up to his post office box. It was one of the few that had been overlooked on this occasion by the local vandals and had not yet been fully destroyed by them. A lot of the kids from the area and even some of the adults had taken to acts of violence against the properties of others which was most likely brought on by the angry times and all of the hatred that everyone had to endure. "No mail today, just another death threat inside," he said aloud speaking to his motorcycle as he read it. "Pay me dummy or your dead!" The threat had been written with crayon pastel and was left on the inside facing of his mail box where he could not miss it. It came along with a signature mark that unmistakably revealed it to be from the local gang mob called "The Crap". They always wanted everybody's money and they always tried to get cash out of him but sometimes it could be something else that they figured that they might get for free. They would take money from any person whether adult or child but only after they were made to feel frightened for their lives. For Rick today it was a stupid death threat but tomorrow it might be something like a broken automobile window, there was no telling. Life even way up in these parts of the mountains came with the miserable presence of many vandals and some of them had left grim memories in his past. There were certain criminals that he could not forget about because they had proven to be very imaginative and he spit at the idea of them. The local members of the mountain hoodlum gang called "The Crap" were sometimes very talented and they particularly excelled at swindling the old or the very weak individuals. The local gang always kept together and could usually be found hanging out in large numbers

together at the shady side of the park. One particularly mean top hoodlum that was very persistent always kept his gang somewhat under control. He organized the gang and they often times called him "Loot". He kept them together by always staying in charge of their every operation even if it meant death to him from another mobster. There were times in the past that Rick had to confront Loot's gang at one or more of their local hideouts, most often during one of their nightly meeting sessions for some reason or another. He was always on his own against them because people were afraid and no friends would follow him into the place where there was hell to pay. Bravely he'd confront them on his own and as fearless as he might be against them there was always a price to pay for confronting them in such a way. A brutal beating was normally the outcome for standing up against them. Even though bruises, cuts and scars had become part of every day life Rick had recently given up raiding their sessions at night.

"Bam!" He closed the post office box lid snugly and returned to his motorcycle and grabbed the handlebars turning the bike towards the dirt road that meandered through part of the gang's territory and then he quickly put the motorcycle's engine to some serious work. The motor roared and rotated the rear tire making it scream out loud and in doing so it laid down some fresh rubber on what was left of the black top highway before finally tearing into the dirt road on his way up towards his cabin.

The winding road through the tough neighborhood seemed to extend forever as the many freed and angry neighborhood hounds appeared out of nowhere, growling and barking to no end at the passing bike. Like always after they showed up on the scene there was going to be somewhat of a chase. There was always a leader amongst the bunch of them and without doubt he could be the most vicious of killers and he would be the one to stand out confidently from the rest of them. The leader was always the main dog that would be the most eager to make an arrogant stand directly in front of the fast moving motorcycle. Typically more vicious than smart he would be the one to not get out of the way in time. Rick was always forced to slow way down for the leader but he had a special procedure for the meaner hound and it was called a big lead pipe. If the killer dog refused to move out of the way it

simply got whacked as the Harley-Davidson cruised by. A big pipe can go a long way when it comes to fighting against angry dogs. The gangs had made it a custom not to feed their animals for days on end thereby making them more and more aggressive towards strangers in particular. These tactics and others were part of the difficulties of the current day times.

The problem was compounded by little or no protection from the law agencies. In order for some of the crime “perps” to survive they sometimes invented new strategies of harassment just to get them by and most of them would try anything. These were people that had no friends and did not work which meant going to extreme measures in order to get enough money to buy a simple meal. Stealing had become rampant amongst them and terrorism was even worse, especially for the very old people. Some elderly folks were still receiving monthly checks from the governmental social agencies and that was the worst of all curses because it brought about terrorism from the neighborhood terrorists and they were the worst of all kind of human being to deal with.

The wheels of Rick’s motorcycle kept turning round and round with the help and grace of God and good luck because if they had suddenly stopped for some reason Rick would have been eaten alive by the hungry pit bull killers that lingered in the road. He twisted the accelerator handle and poured more of the rare gasoline into the reliable old Harley-Davidson’s carburetor and he tore out upward onto his road homeward bound. The dirt-style road twisted around the side of a small lush mountain and soon he and the Harley disappeared from the sight of the canine mob that still lingered in the roadway behind. A few more miles and finally he would be home. Even though there wasn’t much food on the shelves it was still home and he would feel safe there.

The sunlight beamed through the high-reaching trees along the mountain’s western slope as a human silhouette traveled along riding upon an antiquated “iron horse” that spared no time in getting him where he needed to be. Adrenaline pumped through his veins because it was in this small margin of miles so close to home that Rick had been ambushed many times before and had been left to die within a short distance from his house. He knew the stakes were high every single

minute of his life. Even in these highlands it could be very dangerous almost anywhere. One final turn of the roadway and then he would be able to get a view of his remote home when suddenly the bike slipped, throwing rocks and dust off to one side of the rear. He quickly adjusted it with an instinctive maneuver thereby leaning his bike down towards the Mystic soil and barely making the turn. He quickly relaxed again. “Ah! There it is! An old beat-up shanty but it belongs to me, every piece of wood in it,” he thought. He then parked the motorbike and began to study his immediate surroundings for signs of a possible intruder.

The worn old structure of the cabin had a certain charm as it barely stood up against gravity, or so it seemed. It had held up against some very rugged times but now at this new day it must endure even more. It was always a beautiful sight for him to see and going away from it was always very hard. He recalled that he’d been away from it for a complete week now and already he’d begun missing it in his thoughts so very much. Last week a lost child case had taken him away. It was just a simple letter that he’d received from a grieving mother wanting him to come down to the city in order to do some work for her. He was to cover her very special story for the newspaper as the child still remained in the missing category. If he was to eat and sustain his life then he must always run for the calling but there was still no place like home. Up here at the cabin there were no tragic sights for him to witness and he preferred to leave that down in the city where it belonged. Sometimes freshly killed people would be laid out on the sidewalk with many motor car tread marks embedded in their skin, some of them just beginning to harden with rigor mortis. People would leave them in the road until the dead bodies migrated to the concrete walkway. “People just don’t seem to care down there!” he thought and then suddenly a picture of a killed child reflected viciously through his mind but only for a quick instant and then he recovered.

A slight trickling sound echoed through the small valley where he stood. He enjoyed looking out at the cabin that had been placed there many years ago by his grandfather. Built with plenty of muscle and determination and pine wood the ancient building could not have been placed in a better location. A nearby brook that fed into a wonderful

cove emptied itself into a pond where little minnow fish now swam all about. It was a very comfortable place here and the setting was perfect for a solitary human being to exist, but even in such a place the outside world still beckoned him.

Rick was a natural-born reporter and something deep inside of him lived for the action. Tracking down stories was also part of the job but getting the best story meant having crucial timing abilities. His father before him had been an excellent hunter because he had been a door-to-door salesman for fifty years before the times went bad and then changed his world forever. As an old man for him it then became very dangerous

to be outside working with the public and he finally retired with special honors. From the genetic soup that he inherited more than likely a very special gift came down from his father in that Rick possessed a keen and extremely rare ability to find things. Rick could locate anything! At first he would get a strange look on his face and then another calling would erupt from somewhere in his mind and then pretty soon he'd just go after it and before long he'd turn up with the thing, whatever it was. Certain times it could be a material thing but on other occasions it might be a criminal person or a lost child. He'd never failed at finding anyone or anything.

The government often times used him to locate the really mean criminals and these were the good missions. The bad assignments were those in which they required him to find common people that had been labeled as the criminal type even if they weren't. He needed a break from all of those bad missions and most of all he just needed time to hide out for months if he could all alone at the cabin where he could try desperately to forgive himself for helping them persecute good people.

He hated the Agency. It was even more corrupt than the gangs that fought against it. Both entities loved killing each others' members. It was a constant war zone in the hotter spots of the urban mass and he hoped that he'd receive no mail any time soon but he knew that he would probably be disappointed.

There was a gusty wind blowing which he already knew had come out of the south but by the time it had twisted through the hills and valleys and finally arrived into his protected little valley there was no

telling from which direction it could finally arrive. It helped in the knowing of the region's wind patterns. By memory and over the years he'd come to understand the seasons and that the summer winds came from the south but only as long as the warm weather months remained. It was different for the cold northern winds that could otherwise bring blistering cold spells that might last for days or sometimes even months. However, for the passing summer months, the prevailing wind must always originate out of the southern skies.

There was a flock of geese flying overhead into the wind that brought memories back to Rick as he finally sat down by the water's edge. It was a cool place where he and his elderly grandfather often times used to practice shooting using an old double-barreled shot gun that Pap kept which sometimes one of them would use to bring a goose down. Gramps was long gone now. Even though he'd been dead for several years now some of the things Rick had learned from the old man when he was a boy were meant to carry him through all of his lifetime. His Gramps had innocently showed young Rick how to handle a twelve-gauge shotgun back when he was only a mere child. He had been barely strong enough to cock the trigger back when the old man got him started. Releasing it had been easy for him back then. Now at a much later age, thirty-five years old to be exact, it wasn't so easy. Since then he had been forced to pull many triggers back and then release them forward killing many bad men in the process. During all of his gun fights he had always played it fair by waiting for the other man to make the first move thereby giving Rick good enough reason not to think much about the killing later. When he knew that he was going to have to kill another man he always made sure it was self-defense for his own sake because killing in this day and age unfortunately had become part of daily life. Rick was neither a law officer nor a man of justice. He was just a very talented reporter with a keen instinct to kill when necessary and like everybody else in the world he was just trying to make it through the hard times of another day in his life.

The old cabin creaked and moaned under the force of the outside wind as Rick approached it from the front. The old pine wood of which it was constructed had lasted for longer than a century now and remained plenty strong in most parts of the house. On the inside the

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passing years were reflected by the cabin's interior because time had been responsible for polishing the white pine to a darker color and now the walls faintly reflected every little bit of sunlight as Rick slowly opened the front door. He entered with little fear because in this place he knew the whereabouts of every stick of wood that lay outside and on the inside he'd always been careful to leave a piece of tape hidden away beyond sight but stuck to the door so as to reveal the entry of an intruder. The hard years had given the man a lot of traumatic experience and by now he'd learned of special ways to prevent surprises. Giving his enemies a slight upper hand he'd learned could be a very costly mistake. He normally carried a fast pump sawed-off twelve-gauge shotgun at his waist when arriving but today some feeling told him that it wasn't needed so he had left it in the motorcycle carrying case. He felt at ease in this place and didn't want to lug it around everywhere when it wasn't going to be used.

Later on into the evening the fire burned hot inside the old pot-bellied stove and the thin steel exhaust pipe whistled sounds from the currents of the southern wind that tore through the valley and overhead. The sounds plastered themselves against the thin walls of the hundred-year-old place leaving a tired man even more exhausted. He sat at the kitchen table sipping on a bowl of canned mushroom soup and going over some of his memories that seemed to follow him ever closer with each new day. Modern-day life for a reporter was fast-moving and could take a big chunk out of a man's soul if he let it. Being a present-day reporter meant a lot of things. Some of the responsibilities that came with the job he liked while others he just tried to accept and the worst of them he could never forget, but at least in this peaceful little valley the only thing that affected him were the seasons and time.

Outside the heavenly moonlight lit up the trickling stream which in turn reflected its light beams back into the darkness of the night all the while sharing the quiet moments with the rickety old cabin as the passing hours of the evening peacefully tumbled onward. Inside a tired and beaten reporter dreamed of a more peaceful life while sleeping soundly within the cabin walls but the dream time was much too short.

The troubled times had all started about a decade before. Up until

that time life had been pretty fair for the average citizen. Greed had started and brought about the acts of national terrorism which carried through all along. The people became conditioned to war on the home front as they watched the evening news shows on television and saw others being blown away. Bombings occurred daily and there was never an end in sight.

Then one day all of humanity received a shock in the form of an alien visit from the heavens. Without any warning whatsoever a flagship from another world set down in front of the country's capital building and would not leave. All of the intelligence agencies could not cover up the event that was unfolding before every citizen's eyes. The Army at the time encircled the craft and probed it using Geiger counters and other investigative techniques but none ever worked. It was a strange sight and every television station in the land covered all of the details.

Certain religious orders did not nor would not even try to accept the fact that there were other life forms in the universe. They rebelled and attacked others of different faiths nearby. Just when all hell was about to break loose an alien popped out of the shiny metallic space craft and addressed the public scene. No words were ever spoken by the alien creature although everyone present seemed to understand what the being was thinking. He wanted a press conference and he was quickly granted one by the President. To this day most citizens have still not forgotten the confusion about it all.

The daily talk shows served to magnify the effect this supernatural event would have on civilization by the senseless interviews they provided: "This is a new day for all of humanity and perhaps for every creature in the galaxy!" one anchor man had said. "Could their arrival someday lead us into a war against them in a human vs. alien battle?" he had further asked of a guest speaker from the New Space Frontier Association and the specialist had been unable to provide an honest answer. "Are these creatures known to travel through the boundaries of time? Can they pass over the dimensions of time and space very easily?" he had gone on to ask the space specialist.

"I can't say for sure," was all that the poor man had been able to come up with as a response.

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There was much conjecture as to why these creatures from the great beyond had arrived but in reality the long and skinny alien species could have cared less about how humanity might have felt towards them. It seemed that their main interest was not in war with us of any kind or of any sort of takeover at all and that their only real concern was to save the human race from itself. From the beginning to the end of the alien interview the primary topic was that mankind might exterminate itself by using powerful nuclear weapons against one another. The aliens spoke to each other using telepathy and used one human person to relay a single message of extreme importance to all of the human species. The message was that the governments of all our lands must learn how to use nuclear capabilities for everyone's best interest and not to kill each other with them. Needless to say on that day the whole world, even the government men, stopped for one brief hour to watch and listen to the alien interview. It was not long after what should have been a world-changing event that coverage of the alien interview disappeared from headline status and was soon forgotten about. It really didn't matter anything to us after all! Nothing in the world really changed for the better for most people after that eventful day in September and the daily lives for almost everyone had continued to grow ever more pathetic. In reality life was probably made even worse by the interview because mankind now had a factual basis that his species was not the only one in existence. For some odd reason humanity has always needed to feel that there could be only one single intelligent creature in the universe.

Rick Allen was the man that the government leaders had chosen to participate in the interview and was the only interpreter involved. The alien creatures had insisted that there be only one man to participate in this event. They needed someone that was really good with words and possessed an open mind towards them and he was the man. He also had a proven track record and the fact that he was chosen showed that the government leaders considered him to be fearless against almost anything and to have a keen instinct to look for anything that might otherwise have remained hidden within the aliens' messages.

During most of the hour-long interview he'd gone face to face with the space beings and communicated with them using only his thoughts.

The creatures had spoken to him with mental voices much in the same way a person might hear his own mental voices when thinking all alone and unto himself. Rick had received the messages that the alien beings provided inside of his mind as best he could. He then had relayed the messages coming from the long skinny aliens back into a microphone using his own voice which was captured and then recorded back into a machine and then later on released to the public domain.

There had been some graphic details that had gone along with the voices in the form of vision tracks that he had not been able to find the words to explain and even later on and under extreme hypnosis an explanation had still been way beyond reach for him. The images were buried deep inside of his mind and only a certain light source in the ultra violet spectrum was able to regenerate them but it also had a very negative effect upon him. He had become aware of this sensitivity to ultraviolet light during a test that he later underwent at the Pinkman Institute. For years after the alien interview the government used him as a guinea pig by continually requiring the testing procedures. He felt that they were invasive towards his mind in looking for ways to activate his memory of the images and he was right because the probing was painful and felt unnatural. Rick had his own theories about why these memories were so vague and unexpressible. Although he didn't rule out the possibility that he'd unconsciously stolen them from the aliens' minds and that he himself had somehow buried them in his unconscious mind he thought that there was also a possibility that some of their mental images had simply bled over from one of them into his mind. Since the creatures' mental capabilities were strong enough for telepathic communication perhaps something that powerful might bleed information naturally as well. From the contact he'd had with them he had sensed that they were capable of destroying a mere human's mind within seconds if they wanted to and of this he was sure. The other option was that perhaps they had deliberately imprinted the images inside of his subconscious mind for some reason as yet unknown!

It had been ten years now since Rick had gone through the alien interview and because of its one-of-a-kind nature he'd come to a very high level of notoriety all at once. For that he felt neither good nor bad. One thing that he could say with certainty was that the hour-long

interview with the boney-faced aliens had changed his life forever in both good ways and bad. Sure, he received all the big job offers and signed the larger contracts with the media but sometimes he regretted ever having experienced it at all because he found out the hard way that people just do not forget faces or sometimes even names, especially when one's face had been plastered throughout all the nation's media as his had and furthermore sent out to the whole world in such a way that it was hard for him to feel comfortable about his own life. Another down side to it was that many people harbored anger against him because they felt that he might be withholding some very important information from them although in reality such accusations were completely untrue. People simply refused to believe the literary man's claim that he simply was incapable of bringing forth all of the details and they would not allow for the possibility that his thoughts had been scrambled by the alien creature. To show their disdain for his claims they scornfully dubbed him "The Literary Man" which was a name that stuck with him and ten years later still made him flinch inside. "Live and let live" had always been his motto but other people seemed to have opinions of their own about life in this day and age and Rick found out that anything that can be used against you will be exercised upon you.

Besides the changes in Rick's personal life there were other big changes that came after the landmark event. Only a few months after the only alien interview ever to date came the disintegration of the main prison establishments. And then the ailing stock market kept collapsing time and time again bringing more and more poverty to the once strong nation. The people that had once worried themselves about changing the tires on their RV coach suddenly became more and more concerned about being able to afford to eat a good meal. The peoples' government became broke over a short period of time and then corruption seeped into all levels of the establishment until all aspects of it came to desperate levels of existence. One day the old government changed its name to what it is currently called: "THE AGENCY".

During its first months of control it was announced that certain changes would immediately take effect. The first and probably the worst of the new laws that were given out by the new order was the

release of all the criminal elements from all of the prison institutions indicating that if a “perp” had not perpetuated a capital offense or wasn’t a sexual offender then he was subject to be freed immediately after implantation with a “code”. Those that had been found guilty of a capital offense were to be executed on the spot which meant killing them inside of their prison cells. Sexual offenders were to be hung without prejudice and if necessary the gallows were to be constructed outside in a public location where they were to be put into immediate use while under public view. The remains of all those that were executed were to be piled in the prison yard and then finally burned to an ash category.

Things had continued to change drastically from that day on. Men, women and even children began to carry guns and most folks had to use them at one point or another in their lives. Citizens and criminals alike had no fear of retribution from the law because in reality there was no longer any current law in force, only men wearing uniforms that might do something if the money were right. Very deliberate crimes became a normal occurrence and a person simply had to handle life completely on his own.

The sunlight burned through Rick’s eyelids as he began to awaken from a peaceful night’s sleep. He hadn’t slept well for about a week now and the peacefulness inside the cabin made it just that much harder to begin a new day. Slowly he squeezed himself out of the old wooden bed that supported the new mattress that he had slept so soundly upon and although barely awake he began making a pot of freshly brewed coffee on top of the still hot old pot-bellied stove. Outside he could hear the chorus of a variety of bird species singing away into the blue morning sky and this further awakened the young man. From off in a faraway tree Rick could distinguish a hawk’s voice from the other bird voices. Suddenly there was complete silence and then for an instant even the whistling of the heating coffee seemed to hush. Instantly after the morning song had ceased all of the birds broke away from the trees and took off flying to an unknown destination as if they had been suddenly startled by something unnatural. Rick had experienced this sensation before and for some strange reason it had of late been

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occurring with increasing frequency. He figured it could be the noises from the bombing down below in the big city.

Sure enough very soon thereafter came a very loud booming effect that eventually pounded its way through the peaceful little valley area and the fast-moving sound vibrations nearly shattered a couple of the cabin's older windows, but like time itself they managed to hold up against it all. It was the war against the gangs again and like usual they were probably holed up inside one of the city's retired jail houses. They preferred the concrete tomb-like structures and the surrounding areas because ground troops dared not invade these. Most of the jail houses were built very sturdy and could be used as fortresses by the gangs. Many innocent people now lived very close to the war zone and a ground attack was simply out of the question. The young members of the city gangs had studied the guerilla tactics from their fathers' history and had taken to fighting much like the Vietnore soldiers of the Central Continent did during the American Police Campaign of the sixties and early seventies era. As an Agency soldier it had become quite impossible to tell the enemy from a regular citizen. It was against Agency policy to kill innocent citizens under public view as this could bring out a another public uprising so they preferred to do it in non-public areas.

Rick grabbed the old coffee pot from the stove top and poured a cup full of Brazilian bean mud into an old porcelain coffee cup that had been handed down through the generations. He kicked back and listened to the bombing from an old wooden chair that had been in the cabin long enough to say it permanently belonged there. He had become conditioned to be somewhat indifferent to the diving sounds that the jets made during their strikes on their targets almost fifty miles away. The Agency now had access to some very quick jets in their air force and they could cover a large amount of miles in a very short time. For one of those birds fifty miles could be covered in a single moment's time and sometimes they would overshoot their target thereby ending up directly overhead and then perhaps they would make a final turning maneuver. He had often felt that somehow the pilots might be showing off to the residents of the mountain corridor.

Short of the bombing another uneventful day seemed to be in the

making as the winds poured in and out of the area with slight gusts from the south making for a good day to linger inside the old pine cabin's walls. One of the single-pane windows creaked as it was pulled inward and then finally closed by the reclusive reporter that somehow thought he might hide away forever inside.

Down below and only a few miles away however a car was silently traveling along the dirt road. It had already made it through the tough mountain neighborhood that lay just a couple miles below. The automobile finally found its way up to the correct turn in the road and was now nearing the driveway up to the secluded cabin where Rick was resting inside. "Beep! Beep!" the car horn sounded filling the valley with a sudden rush of excitement as it made a final turn up into the cabin's driveway. It was a fellow reporter Rick had heard others refer to as Debbie! The sound of iron already beginning to cool from under the car's front differential clicked and snapped away as Rick peered out of the cabin's front doorway looking at the woman driver through her front windshield. She was in no hurry to get out of the car because of her make-up requiring some looking into. She apparently had not noticed that Rick was observing her from not too far away until she finally looked around. "Ahh! What a man!" she thought and she opened the car door and got out in no time at all. "Hello," she said with a tenderness in her voice that was easily recognized by Rick to be very feminine and not very tough-sounding. "Are you Rick?" she inquired.

"Yes," was his response.

"Sir, I have been sent from the Daily Western to inform you that the chief is requiring your presence at headquarters immediately. He said that tomorrow would be fine, though."

Rick knew from past experience with other messengers that it would probably be fruitless to question her any further because she probably had not been told anything anyway other than to come get him from his private retreat but he could not resist asking her just the same. "Why the intrusion, my dear?" he queried.

"I don't know any details for certain, sir, and I'd rather not speculate." Her response was like the others that had come before and that was that she simply did not know. "However," she added, "I can

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stay overnight and visit with you if you have an extra spot.”

Rick understood that it had taken her most of the day to get this far. It had surely been a difficult journey past the control center and then even beyond there and Rick didn’t have the heart to send her away. Maybe she needed a peaceful moment as well. “Okay,” he replied. “That’s a very good idea! I’ll cook supper and then maybe we can talk about some other things.”

Rick could not help being a gentleman. It was in his basic nature to be that way and so he invited the young woman inside and allowed her to place her bags and things down on the floor. She was in very good physical condition and she carried herself quite nicely. Long strands of brownish hair draped down from both sides upon her forehead and then extended almost all the way down to her knees where the bottom ends of them curled up a little bit. She hadn’t dosed on the mascara like he’d earlier figured she might as so many women had done in the past in anticipation of meeting him. For Debbie such things were unnecessary because this girl really didn’t need much if any make-up at all. Nature had been good to her and had given her very pleasant features. He thought to himself that she didn’t need very much help to get plenty of attention from the opposite gender.

Debbie milled around the cabin’s interior as though she were using a form of inner vision to read some of the happy events of the past years that had happened here to Rick and his grandfather.

“You’ve been here a long time, haven’t you?” she inquired.

“Oh, yeah. All my life at one time or another,” he keenly responded.

“You can even hear the bombing raids fifty miles away. I heard them just as I was approaching the cabin and to be honest I think that your next mission will be somehow connected to the war down there. There has been a lot of recent attention given to the gang movement because people are beginning to sympathize with the gang-bangers saying that they are fighting for the people against the Agency.”

“Yes, I know that the people are growing restless for change in the city but how do you suppose that this might involve me?” Rick further inquired of the young lass reporter.

“Perhaps that isn’t it at all,” she replied. “There is one more thing

that might involve you, sir! Perhaps you will be required to find someone again! It could be related to a series of murders that goes back almost twenty years because until recently the murderer had usually victimized only street walkers and drug junkies of the night. Not a very important level of society would you say?"

"Well!" Rick replied almost shocked by her cold words for other people and then said nothing more as she continued speaking to him.

"A general's daughter was recently murdered in cold blood," Debbie went on to explain. "She was later found dead in her home by her poor unsuspecting father. He returned to the house after a full day's work only to find a very gruesome sight on the kitchen table. And this killer works in a very original way. He does custom work on the victims and somehow he is able to leave very few clues behind. It must be quite an ordeal for the victims the way that they are slowly dismembered. The coroner's report indicates that he firmly ties them with duct tape so that they are completely bound and fully gagged to the point where they can make no sounds. He then uses local anesthetics to keep the victims conscious for as long as possible and then slices the skin around the body parts one at a time. His next procedure is the most gruesome of all because he uses brute force to physically pull his victims into pieces, one body part at a time. The coroner theorizes that the killer must be a Caucasian man of great physical strength. How he has concluded that he is a white man there's no way of telling but surely he must have had some grounds to make that call. And it appears that the killer needs electricity to accomplish his butchery because during each killing he keeps a hot iron burning with the current from a wall socket and then uses the iron to cauterize the bloody wide-opened sockets. From each new victim he seems to be taking a collection that might indicate that he's building another body because he takes a different human part every time and that particular missing part is very accurately and precisely removed much like a surgeon could do. The investigators' work reveals that he uses extremely sharp instruments for the dismembering process, ones that only a doctor might possess. Well, I don't know about you, Rick, but just talking about such a thing makes my stomach weak."

"Yeah, mine too! I wish you would just let it ride," he replied

frankly while looking away as if his mind were taking off perhaps somewhere deep inside of a past reflection. Then his eyes returned to her and he said, "Tomorrow will come soon enough and then we'll both know more details when I hear more from the chief. But I think that you are right, my dear. I will probably be sent on another manhunt."

Rick had hunted evil men most of his life using his reporter credentials mainly as a cover because in the current times policemen that weren't corrupt and part of a very large sub-force were found out and killed. It was hazardous to be an honest cop in these days.

Yeah, the world had gone crazy and Rick had watched it change over time and maybe he'd gone a little nuts himself through the years. Sometimes he wondered about that but chasing down a purely evil man he actually could accept very easily. It was the ones that weren't evil that he dreaded ever bringing in to the Agency. They paid him to hunt other men and then sometimes he might even write about it later because writing was his true passion.

Rick proceeded to grab up some potatoes from the owner-built shelves that had been made out of raw dimension lumber some years after the old cabin had been stood up. He reached down grabbing the 10-pound bag with both hands from beneath the sink cabinet and noticed that Debbie had recently received a flesh wound to her left knee. It was a scrape kind of injury and he thought that it could use some medical attention so he grabbed some medical supplies from the cabinet as well.

"Here, my dear, put this ointment on it and here is a bandage as well," he said to her. She took the medical supplies and began to doctor herself and as she did the attractive young lady hiked her dress to midway up her thigh. The beautiful soft skin of her upper leg was revealed to Rick and he could not help but look upon her beauty.

"It's okay to look at me," she said. "I imagine that you have been up here without a woman for a very long time."

"Oh yes! Yes!" he replied. "But what kind of a host does that make me looking at you with lust in my eyes like that?" he interjected.

"A friendly one," she replied.

"Hah! hah!" they both laughed and enjoyed the moment that they

shared together.

Rick knew that the moment couldn't last forever so he broke in saying, "Well I had better get supper going forward or were both going to be half-starved from our empty bellies come the break of dawn."

"Yeah!" Debbie responded. "I'll help," and she grabbed up the potato peeler and began to peel a small bunch of the small red potatoes. The cool breeze of the evening softly whisked through the window as both of them ate supper together at the kitchen table further enjoying each other's company and sharing humor. It wasn't often Rick experienced the pleasure of having a beautiful woman around who was a good talker and who would also help out on the chores when dinner was over. He'd been lonely for a very long time and part of that loneliness had been forgotten when the next morning came around.

"Boom! Boom!" the sounds of a terrific explosion in a faraway place awakened both of the sleeping reporters from the "land of nod". The walls creaked every time another targeted bomb was dropped down in the city below until finally Rick arose from bed and after dressing made it to the living room where he sat on the couch. Then he yelled at Debbie, "Come on, Lass, we must go! We're running late!"

She piled out of bed still barely in her undies and ran through the kitchen area looking around for her forgotten purse. "Oh, there it is," she said before retrieving it from the floor and then returning to the bedroom. "I'll just be a moment," she declared.

Rick became overanxious and hurried out the front door to the front yard where he began warming up his motorcycle. Soon afterwards Debbie appeared through the front doorway looking only partially dressed. Then she ran to her car after slamming the cabin door to behind her. "It's locked!" she yelled over the sounds of the revving motorcycle engine and then she fired her own vehicle up. Soon they were both heading down the driveway towards the main road that eventually would lead them back through the settlement.

Debbie's old dented beater car rolled like thunder down the road and through the settlement and even at this early hour there were misfits lingering around outside houses. There was no end to many of their sufferings because most of them were already hard-core heroin or crystal meth addicts. For some the addiction had started from the very

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first moment they had tried the drug while for others it had taken awhile for them to become enslaved to the drug, perhaps even years. These latter types might do a little pinch here and a little snort there but only once in awhile until finally at last they found themselves doing the drug quite often. Then they would usually declare they would quit forever but few ever made it that far. "Some win, some lose," Rick was thinking as he plowed through the dust devil that Debbie's old clunker automobile had created just ahead of him. He poured the precious gas into the motorcycle's carburetor as his hand twisted the accelerator even harder and the twin-cylinder road bike responded by letting out a loud racket that pounded the ears of everyone within a quarter mile of the place. Many of the trouble mongers stood up and peeled their tired eyes at the man riding the Harley but Rick barely gave them a glance as he tore through the area. The hard sound of two cylinder heads beating away left a calm in the air for the onlookers as the rumble slowly faded away.

The old shed corral that had withstood many years of abuse from leaning ponies that were anxious to make an itch go away imprinted an image into the corner of Rick's eye as he glanced at the wonderful view that the shed and the valley allowed him for one last time before he hit the black top road that wasn't far from the overly congested highway. Once on the highway there was a much different view to behold and it wasn't a pleasant thing to see because of the many abandoned cars that desperate people could no longer afford to maintain that had been piled up by the county men sometimes ten cars high. It made for an awful obstacle to get around especially if a driver was in a rush. Finally, after spending the couple of hours' drive time that it took to cover only fifty miles distance from the cabin the pair rolled into the control station where two guards stood at attention waiting for the next commuter to roll in. They stopped Debbie's car first and asked her where she was going. She replied that she was on her way to work. The guard had seen many people pass through his station and he could read most people like a book and could sense who he might intimidate so he confronted her very directly, "Let's see your permit, young lady."

"Oh, it's in my purse," she said with a tremble in her voice. Almost frightened by the experience she handed it to him. Her fingers thumped

away at the steering wheel as he seemed to read every word then he handed her papers back and directly pointed her in a direction through the gate.

Rick pulled his motorcycle into the threshold and handed out his document to the guard that stood directly in front of his cycle.

“I have seen you before haven’t I, sir?”

Rick thought for a minute and replied, “Well yes! I come through here sometimes, you see.”

And the guard interrupted him by saying, “Oh, you’re the reporter.”

“Yes, that’s me,” Rick said.

“You can go on through, sir,” and then the guard stood aside allowing the reporter to drive by.

Rick could look ahead and see the city that lay at a much lower elevation. It seemed to extend as far as the naked eye could see. Seemingly there was no end to it and the pollution rose above the factories almost engulfing large portions of the browned skies as it climbed up into the higher reaches of the atmosphere. For awhile he kept on Debbie’s tail pipe as the old clunker was easy to follow but eventually lost interest in following her because he knew a much shorter way and decided to head towards the office without her.

In a way it was a good thing for Rick to get back to his position in the city even though he hated to leave his home that he’d recently enjoyed so very much. Even Rick needed something to hold his mind together because like all men he was mortal and whether he liked it or not he needed something to belong to. He had an instinct to find things but sometimes even that was as elusive to his mind as anything could ever be for someone because sometimes that instinct was turned on inside and at others it was turned off. He’d grown up using it whenever he needed something to eat. There had been plenty of bakeries nearby his auntie’s house where he’d stayed during summer school breaks and it had started there. He started out hunting peoples’ trash and had never stopped hunting for things after that day. One thing always lead to another and one day he found that he was hunting criminals like they were trash.

As Rick drove his motorcycle over a hill he was able to study the downtown area which was now only a short mile away and observe

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that as always it was somewhat of a nightmare. In recent days, however, downtown had become a much better place than it had previously been as many of the cars that had piled up on the streets from a wild night had been hauled away. The real problem was not the abandoned cars but the traveling people that were everywhere, none of whom obeyed any laws. There were always fights erupting amongst the homeless on the city's sidewalks and frequently during afternoon break time there were fights among the day workers, too, which were religiously performed out in the public areas. The rule of thumb on the city streets was fend for yourself. Normally at lunch breaks a typical business man always made sure he was shadowed by either his fellow workers or hired body guards for security reasons. Crimes like blackmail and extortion which had once been considered extraordinary now ran rampant. The successful criminal element had reached an all-time high in performance capabilities and had become highly organized at all gradient levels of modern-day society. The streets of the once bustling little cow town were now crawling with all sorts of life both good and bad but usually all very hungry for something and the very weak suffered tremendously.

Rick rolled into the downtown area where he was heading for his company's parking garage as all of the reporters were allowed to park there during the daytime hours. It was interconnected with the western wing of the Daily Western Newspaper. The attendant waved him through the gated opening and allowed him to proceed up the driveway ramps that finally took him up to the third level of the dimly lit building. Debbie's car was already parked within the level which indicated that she had really stepped on the accelerator to have beaten him there. She was also probably already behind her office desk hard at work on some other story project.

The sliding elevator door popped open. "Ka-ting, ka-ting," went the beeper indicating that all were to board. A young lady perhaps just out of her teenage years quickly boarded the vessel. She stood back over to the other side away from Rick and pushed the button for her floor which told Rick both of them were going to the same floor level. Rick could not help but admire the young lady carrying her brief case for she was a real beauty. It was standard-day practice for the women

of the time to wear short dresses all the time. Some of the ladies of this time favored the loose fitting skirt whereas others preferred to squeeze their hips into the garment and this girl looked as though she'd been poured into hers. Her long thin delicate legs carried her out of the doorway opening first, leaving a pleasant smell of perfume behind for Rick to smell. It was a natural scent that reminded him of flowers that one might get a whiff of when going to a florist shop. And then there it was before him, the main level of the newspaper's journalistic operations as he stepped out of the elevator and beheld the busy sight of news production. Many occupied desk fronts, some of them covered with all sorts of paperwork, littered the interior and just the sight of them brought Rick back into the stark reality of current day life as the young girl from the elevator pronounced some words to him from a front desk area.

"Can I help you, sir?" was her greeting.

"Yes, you can," he replied and then he introduced himself. She recognized his name immediately. Apparently the girl's name was Becky and she had been transferred in from another department to perform on a probationary status. "She was pretty enough! But could she type?" Rick caught himself thinking. Moe had requested her and he was the boss. He was the top dog of operations and whatever he said went! He was a good leader and especially good to Rick in that he allowed him many freedoms not permitted to his other fellow reporters. Perhaps it was because of Rick's seniority or maybe it was because they were good fishing buddies outside of work. Often times they would meet to have a good day of fishing together up at the cabin.

There was Moe. His head had popped out of his office that was down the lengthy isles of desks and off to the right. "Hey, Rick! Come on in here!" he yelled out and then went back inside of the office leaving the partially wooden and glass door half-open. Rick made it down there and greeted him after saying goodbye to Becky. "Hello," Moe said, "how was the rest period?"

"Oh, okay," Rick replied.

"And yourself? How are you doing, old boy?" Rick asked him in return.

"Pretty good," Moe replied and then went on, "but we have a

situation going on that requires your specialized attention and that's why you were called back down here to the city. Yeah! There's been a new murder over on the west side and it involved a general's daughter. Maybe Debbie told you a little about it because she has already been doing some research on the story. Did she mention anything at all on the topic?"

"Yes!" Rick replied, "she told me some of the details. But why do you need me? I mean, surely the police have an idea!"

"No! They really don't have a clue who is responsible for the killings just yet. That's why you were called into the scenario because you are such a damned good track hound once you get on the trail of something or someone. We need your expertise."

"Well!" Rick sighed and then considered the matter while still looking down at his feet before asking Moe a question. "Are the Agency police going to have updates on the case available or will I have to go through the regular procedures that always take a lot of valuable time? Can I expect full cooperation from them? They always make getting information such a hassle you know!" Rick went on as if he was already getting disturbed from the idea of dealing with the Agency's tracking files.

"Yes!" Moe responded and quickly went on. "You'll have complete access to all. "We're going to give you all the support that we can possibly offer in this matter because the higher levels of the city government want this serial killer brought in and locked down until we can execute the monster. Becky has been assigned to be your personal attendant if you accept this case and she can handle the job. She's worked for the Agency every since she was just a teenager and she knows about every short cut available in the system so give her a chance to help you. She can be trusted."

Moe sat back in his chair for a minute and looked at Rick from behind his desk. He then pulled a cigar out of the desk drawer and fired it up. Rick had been standing during the conversation but had finally pulled up a chair and sat down just long enough to rest his legs that had grown tired from standing. Moe grabbed the phone intercom and called Becky into his office. "Would you please come in, dear?" he spoke into the phone box.

“Yes!” came the answer on his end. Pretty soon the door swung open and in came Becky and then she said, “Yes, sir!” all the while still grasping her coffee cup with her right hand while standing in front of Moe’s desk.

“Oh, dear,” Moe said. “I forgot my cell phone number. Do you remember what it is, Becky?”

“Yes, sir!” she replied and then she spoke some numbers clearly from the top of her mind.

Moe then introduced her to his star reporter, “Becky, this is Rick. He can help us in this investigation and I want you to see to it that he gets all the assistance that he needs. Okay? You and he are going to be a team.”

“Yes, sir!” was once again her reply. “I have already heard a lot about Rick and I am honored to be on his team. You have built quite a reputation over the years with the Agency, sir, and I hope that I can be of help in any way possible.”

“Yes, dear,” Rick responded. “I’m sure you’ll do just fine.”

Becky was a ten on any scale of beauty. The brown-haired bombshell had the warmest of eyes that could soften any man with a single glance if she wanted to. Her long brown hair gently descended towards the floor but flared with a curl at the ends that almost fell to her ankles as she reached over Moe’s desk to get some papers for filing. He wanted her to do some research on the case and she was to start a brand new file immediately but first they must go over a few preliminary concerns.

“Grab a chair, Becky,” Moe directed. She sat down across from Rick and he could not help but notice her ivory-white luscious soft skin that seemed to have been made especially for her long delicate legs that appeared to jump out of her mini skirt at Rick. He was after all still in his prime and full of the energies that most men have for a beauty like Becky. As he finally managed to remove his eyes from her body Rick caught himself thinking that he was going to find it hard to ignore her physical attributes if they were going to be working as a team. “You know,” said Moe, “this one has been active for many years. He’s been killing down in the drunkard side of town where all the misfits hang out. They say according to his style of homicide that he can be tracked

back in our records all the way to over one hundred murders and they have all taken place here in our city.”

Becky’s eyes bugged out as she was beginning to show some discomfort towards the topic and what she was hearing of the details and she gave a slight frown and then pulled the hair back out of her face and threw it to both sides of her head.

Moe went on to say, “Yes! He’s started to move into another field of work and that is to the killing of women but not only that. His new trend seems to be the daughters of higher-ups. He must be trying to make some kind of a statement to them or perhaps to the world, we don’t know yet, because he hasn’t made it clear. Previously he was just a shadow serial killer but now he has become infamous over night and people in high places are getting very nervous. They want this killing stopped and our jobs could rely upon finding him. Rick, do your best on this one, please!” Moe looked very concerned and Rick hadn’t seen him look quite this way since the Murphy case many years ago and even then he worried to this degree. “Becky! Would you take this to your desk and type it up?” Moe requested of her and as she grabbed for the form it fell from Moe’s hand onto the shiny wax polished floor and jetted into the far western corner of his office.

“Oh, I’ll get it,” Becky volunteered. She was on the target and she strutted in her tight mini skirt over to the fallen piece of paper and almost stiff-legged she bent over and slowly picked up the form that lay just between her black leather high-heeled shoes. A sliver of satin emerged from the bottom of her skirt that began to reveal another form that was even more pleasing to the men’s naked eyes. Becky delivered a sizzling message that evoked a very primal instinct from within both men. It was a drive that was so very hard to understand and furthermore to control but somehow they held themselves in check.

“Is that all for now, gentlemen?” she asked.

“Oh, yes, dear,” Moe responded. At that she turned and left the office leaving both men behind perspiring.

“Well, I’m going to get to work on this case so I’ll call you later, boss, once I know more!” Rick said to Moe as he rose from the office chair and then strolled out of Moe’s office and past Becky’s glass-top covered desk and began heading towards the elevator.

“See you, sir!” a voice carried from a distant place and Rick recognized it as hers.

“Goodbye. I’ll call you later, Becky,” he replied.

“Ka-ting!” the elevator bell rang and Rick boarded the computer-guided contraption that quickly delivered him back to the parking area where he found his parked motorcycle and started it up. The sound coming from the engine of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle bellowed out into the concrete parking garage and filled into the shadows that were cast there by the late morning sunlight as the reporter with a mission in mind barreled past everyone and everything on his way to the Agency’s headquarters where he could start digging for information.

The streets were very crowded and driving was difficult even for a motorcyclist. Even though he could weave in and out of traffic better than an automobile could driving was complicated because people had little respect for a man on a motorized bike. Some would instantly change traffic lanes without signaling first and this made being constantly aware of the other cars extremely important. “To gain an advantage always brings on new circumstances,” was the thought that flowed through Rick’s mind as he navigated through the vicious traffic that flowed endlessly along the corridor. One car popped into his view just ahead as he made a turn towards the Agency’s headquarters and then it stopped as its brakes screeched loudly above the other sounds. Rick turned slightly and went around it but not before kicking a dent into the rider’s side door leaving the driver screaming loudly behind, one finger raised in the traditional one-finger salute fashion.

Rick yelled back, “Pick your nose with it buddy!” as he plowed through the concrete jungle of the inner city leaving the congested mess behind for a lesser traveled back street. “Ah, I remember this place,” Rick thought as many ideas flowed through his head. “This is where all the street people hang out until nighttime and then they tackle the inner places of downtown.” His motorcycle raised some eyebrows as people of the streets and sidewalks watched him quickly pass by them as if an Iron Man had just rolled by. “These folks down here respect a Harley rider and that is why I always takes this route. It makes the journey even shorter,” he thought.

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There were people out on the sidewalks going in all directions away or towards many soup lines that the charitable organizations were operating for the good of all people. Many mental institutions had long since closed their “chambers of horror” to the troubled citizens that now lined the streets and back alleys everywhere. Most of the former mental patients had been freed with no money or support other than three meals a day and some second-hand clothing to wear. There were many sights along this strip.

A beer can flew from a nearby fire hydrant as Rick was watching the faded yellow line in the middle of the street and a little boy child who’d been hiding behind it yelled up into the air, “Go, biker, go!”

Rick glanced back at the boy knowing that he could offer the young child no help from his miserable circumstance in life yet seeing a young boy child living out on the streets made him feel sick just the same.

“Drugs are to blame,” was all that ran through the cyclist’s mind as he kept moving onward along the hooker and pimp-lined street continuing on regardless of the surroundings towards the Agency’s headquarters where he might possibly find some answers.

He was only two blocks away from the brown five-level building where the Agency kept all of their computer tracking files and information systems and was slowing down to look for a parking area when a pimp-looking man emerged into the middle of the street looking as if he were in some kind of distress. Rick paid him little mind and turned to go around the him but couldn’t because the man jumped in front of the motorcycle waving a large sheath knife and then started moving around to flank him from his other side. The sound of bawling and burning rubber tire echoed through every ear on the block after the bike stopped and everyone took notice of the event that was about to go down in the middle of the street. The pimp stood his ground within arms reach of Rick and pointed the knife at him saying, “You better gimme the bike, honky, or you’re dead meat,” and then he flipped the knife over and over in his hand as if to show how accomplished he was at using it. Rick said nothing in return but stared at the man as if he weren’t excited in the least little bit. A big mean wrinkle formed on Rick’s forehead as he dismounted from the bike and walked towards the threatening pimp. Rick hated pimps most of all and this particular

one was quickly getting on his nerves. The pimp just kept on threatening.

“Okay, come on!” Rick said and instantly the big burly street man dove at him head first with the knife leading the way as if he were charging into a bull fight. It happened more quickly than the eye could see because the street man had closed his eyes before charging in and that was his fatal mistake. Rick instantly grabbed the weapon from the hands of the confused attacker and plunged it deep into the man’s stomach so that only the handle was left to view. It was a primitive homemade shank and the cloth that formed the handle now dripped the man’s bloody red substance onto the ground wetting his shoes as it dropped down. The end was near for the pimp as he looked up at Rick and called him a foul name in some kind of local lingo that Rick only partially understood. The journalist still somewhat on his guard remounted his bike and started the motorcycle, all the while watching the dying man out of the corner of his eye as he got weaker and weaker. Rick didn’t like to get involved in a fight for his life with too many words because he felt that talking made for nothing more than a distraction and could give the enemy an unfair advantage. He’d seen many men die because they allowed words to get in the way of good sense defensive measures.

Rick eased his bike down the street and then rolled up in front of the Agency building and the rumbling of the Harley’s motor awoke some of the local tribe that hung around outside the building as Rick backed his Harley into a spot out front. He had barely made it off on the right side when a old man ran up and greeted him saying, “Hello, rider, can I watch the bike? Only cost a quarter and I won’t let anything happen to it, man!”

“Sure, buddy!” was Rick’s reply.

Rick covered the distance over the blood-stained concrete that lay out in front of the cop shop headquarters building and disappeared into its rotating entrance way leaving the old man as a sentry outside. The place seemed empty as he entered the lobby area so he stood there for a moment listening for sounds of life. There were voices up the red-colored concrete stairway passage yet the place seemed strangely quiet for a police headquarters. Rick thought to himself that it should be

busy this time of day and yet there were no people hustling around from one place to another as he would have expected in a normal police office building.

He climbed up the dull-colored stairway and once he made it up to the second floor there was finally some noticeable life around so he kept walking toward room #207 which he decided from the signs on the wall must be down at the very end of the level and off on the left. Suddenly there was a crashing sound and out from behind a falling wooden door came three men, all of them rolled into a squirming ball and hitting the floor. The door bounced very near Rick's feet making a loud sound that shook him up a little. It was surprising and unexpected yet he retained his composure while looking on. There was a young man at the bottom of the pile fighting to get away from the two policemen that were now pounding him to a pulp with their billy clubs. He was screaming at the top of his lungs, "That was my wife, you ----!"

Both cops soon had him spread out, unconscious and profusely bleeding onto the dirty floor. One of them looked up and smiled and laid another fist into the captive man's face and then stopped as he observed Rick standing there. The smaller of the two cops and the nearest to Rick then asked, "Who are you? Are you the new investigator that is supposed to be coming in?"

"Yes, that's me!" he replied. "I see you boys are busy today! Don't let me interrupt your work, fellas," and he headed on. Pretty soon after walking past many half-opened and unfriendly doors he found room #207 and opened its screeching old door to reveal his new work home. The white textured walls had many holes remaining and otherwise showed signs of many repairs badly done. There were no curtains to hide behind and the afternoon sun beat into the room through its paint-smudged windows warming it somewhat. "This will do," he thought as he investigated the emptied desk that was destined to be his very own, probably for some time. Dusty cob webs hung from the ceiling that had probably been there for a very long while. Perhaps they were too high for the janitor to reach if there was such a person. The somber-looking place really began to lighten up for him when a cat strolled into the office and leaped onto the old couch that filled part of the northern corner. The calico pussy who appeared to be a very

friendly feline began the conversation by pronouncing her first meow to him.

“Hello, kitty, what’s your name?” he mumbled in return and the cat somehow seemed to understand.

“Meow! Meow!” she went on while looking up at him from her perch on the sofa. Finally he couldn’t resist anymore and he reached down and grabbed her up, pulling her into his stomach area.

“She likes the attention so far,” he thought. “Oh, yeah, she’s so nice,” he was just beginning to think when she moved up to where she could see him face to face, eyeball to eyeball. All at once the friendly feline became a very unfriendly cat as she puffed up with every hair standing straight on end, sinking one of her many claws into his cheek before he could release her. As she barreled out of the doorway much resembling a small white tornado there was a man approaching the office door way laughing very loudly. He came in with a smile stretched across his face and introduced himself as Brian. He apparently was a local policeman that was in-house doing some paper work on a recent shooting incident where a fellow cop had been shot in the back by someone that they thought could have been one of their own. It was an on-going affair that had been covered by the news media for some time now and Rick recognized the man’s face immediately as he reached out to shake his hand.

“Hello! As you can read on this silly name tag that we all must wear, my name is Brian,” the man said. “You must be the Rick that we’ve all heard about coming from the Daily West today. Welcome, my friend, to the precinct from hell, and I see from the wound on your face that you have just had a Psycho Kitty experience. Relax, my friend, she always gets every newbie for the first time, but give it a week or two then you might like her better.”

“Well, I liked her just fine until she about tore my face off,” Rick replied.

“Hah! Hah!” Brian laughed. “Some say that she was raised by a Python snake that was liberated from a bunch of junkies that sold drugs on the north side of the city and they ended up getting busted by our team. Psycho Kitty soon became an item around here. She has full run of the place now and everyone spoils her rotten, and besides she’s a

great mouse hunter to say the least.” By the way he spoke Brian seemed to like Psycho Kitty quite a bit.

Even if she had ripped Rick’s face a little bit he still liked the cat nonetheless because she had some real character about her. “So you are the Brian guy that is involved in the Patrosha case that is currently undergoing scrutiny from the higher-ups?”

“Yes,” Brian replied. “It seems that somebody in the higher levels needs a martyr to hang, you know. They haven’t done that for awhile now.”

“Yeah, I know,” Rick replied while holding his face where the kitty had taken some hide away. “I wish you the best on that matter, Brian. Good things can happen, you know, even in a case like this.”

“Yes,” he responded, “I know. Maybe I am just overly concerned these days and it could be that all this hype has got me going full throttle ahead into a bad case of full blown paranoia, you know, the kind that makes normal people turn into animals sometimes.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen my share of that as well and I don’t think any of it was much good. Sometimes people just go overboard on matters that don’t concern them,” Rick could not help but add in his piece of experience.

“Well, I’m not going to cooperate because losing my self-control is not something that I have ever been much good at.” He seemed to be in earnest in what he said as he stood in the doorway looking out for the wild rampageous kitty that had earlier stormed the area. Pretty soon Brian left the office without realizing he’d left with more than what he’d come in with because he now had a possible ally in Rick. After meeting the person that everybody wanted to burn Rick suddenly realized that a man like Brian could not be as bad as everyone accusingly said he was. Rick could sense it. He knew the traits to look for in honest men and also those of the pathetic liar. He always looked for certain telltale signs during the course of a conversation that revealed certain traits about a person, traits that could not be hidden or covered up. Brian said that he did not back-shoot the other cop and Rick believed his story. It was that simple. “A person’s either a liar or he’s not, and this man simply isn’t a liar,” was the thought that kept running through Rick’s mind as the younger man walking away from

Rick's office disappeared into another nearby office.

--Ring! Ring--

"Oh, fiddle sticks! It's that damned phone already ringing away. It won't ever stop now that they know where to find me." Rick was already beginning to slip into his normal behavior patterns by speaking to the phone as he charged towards it. It was Becky.

"Hello, sir. I'm just calling to see if you need anything over there. I can come over to answer the phones for you right now if you'd like because Moe said that maybe I should. He also ordered me to start reporting over there to the Agency headquarters come first thing tomorrow morning."

"Oh, Becky! Just take the rest of the day off and tell no one, okay?"

There was a moment of silence before she responded by saying, "You know, sir, I think I'm going to like having you for a boss!"

"Hah!" both parties laughed into the telephone until finally their connection was broken by a tracer signal that had been planted into the phone connection.

"Buss! Buss!" was the sound that Rick had come to know when someone was tying into his phone line. He'd heard it many times before. The Agency had always kept track of his conversations. They'd even used copies of them to blackmail him into working for them in the past. It was something that he'd learned to accept but not to ignore. He was careful what he said over the telephone line because he knew for certain that someone would be listening on the other end and this had been proven to him to be costly. Rick knew that Becky would report to work probably earlier than required so he didn't make an attempt to return her call. It was getting late, perhaps time to call it an early day where he would go to the company suite for some rest and relaxation. After all it was going to be a long day tomorrow, much too long to face without having a fresh mind and a rested body. Even at his young age a good rest was a very important aspect for surviving the job-related pressures that were bound to come rolling in soon.

"Good bye, Psycho Kitty," he said in a voice loud enough to carry to wherever the malicious wonder could have been hiding out, most likely in a nearby spot where she could be quite comfortable while

viewing his every move he supposed. Upon shutting the door and a quick turn of the key lock he walked away without looking towards the area from which the kitty had recently started up meowing. "It's another dirty trick," he thought so he continued to storm out of the front entrance without paying her any more mind.

The old sentinel gentleman that had been patiently awaiting Rick's return to get his motorcycle happily received a five dollar bill from the Harley motorcycle man. His tired old hand shook as Rick gave him a final handshake before firing up the Harley bike. "You going to be here every day, old boy?" he asked him.

"Yes, I surely will for that kind of money. You can bet your hide I'll be here. Bright and early, too!" the old man stated as he watched the leather-coated man kick-start his machine and then quickly roll away from him and on past the bloodied dead body of the pimp that Rick had earlier dealt some very bad cards out to. The rigor mortis shell now lay out on the blood-stained sidewalk.

"Ah, what a day," he thought aloud as the wind of the ever-changing city blew through his long brown hair, at times carrying the brownish strands straight backwards. The sun had begun to fall like a big orange basketball and now hung lazily in the sky, not about to hurry over the edge of the Mystic and into another world. Its blinding rays forced Rick to pull out an old pair of sunglasses that he always carried inside one of his shirt pockets. "You can never have too many pairs of these," he said as he slid the shades over his eyes, and nothing could have been closer to the truth than these unheard words. In this day and age the ultraviolet radiation levels had risen threefold in only a few years and were responsible for greatly shortening the average life span of all the humans. Most people were now dying in their mid-fifties and nothing could be done about it but a far greater tragedy was among the mostly forgotten and abandoned deformed children that lined the city streets at night. Covered in cloth from head to toe their images appeared on the scene as some were out looking for a single meal of the day, perhaps finding it anywhere or any way that was possible.

At last he made it to the parking area for the living quarters of the company's executive members. It was a safe parking area that would allow Rick to sleep without worrying all night about his "hog". There

was a pool area on the top level where during the evenings people liked to lounge around outside, weather permitting, where they could enjoy a few moments in separation from the burning hot sunlight of the dreaded daytime. There were community hot tubs on each level of the building and there was even an exercise gymnasium in the basement. It was a very nice arrangement and Rick had never had any complaints about the apartment or his neighbors. Even if he ever had problems here he'd never say anything anyway because like always he'd find a solution himself because that was just his way.

"Crack!" the apartment door squawked a little bit as Rick opened it and pushed it inward. The cooler immediately kicked in and the on-board blower pushed air up through a cavity in the floor panel. It felt wonderfully cool inside. A brand new side-by-side refrigerator idled away in a far-off corner of the buffet. In another corner sat a fireplace full of wood. Then there was the wine shelf where many fresh new bottles of exotic wine had been invitingly placed by building management should the executive suite resident ever spontaneously decide to have a party. Rick shut the door easily and it closed very tightly as if it were built to be sucked into the seamed wall cavity. A pocket of air formed around the door and further created a small vacuum in the cool room as it was closed. There were soft luxury furniture items that stood inside the sunken living room area which had been neatly placed so as to provide a feeling of spaciousness. It wasn't home in the mountains but the place surely was comfortable even for a rugged man like Rick.

As Rick suddenly grabbed for his cellular phone not knowing why a call suddenly came over the air waves. "Ring ! Ring!" The display said it was Debbie calling.

"Hello! Rick!" she said in an excited tone. "What are you doing? Have you made it to the apartment yet?"

"Yes, yes. I have just made it through the doorway!" he replied to the voice on the other end of the phone line.

"Can I come over?" she asked him politely yet anxiously. "There are some things that we need to cover together, and can I bring my swimming outfit, because the pool in our complex has been down for service for nearly a week and it seems like forever? I may need to cool

off,” she said as if her main desire was really to get some swimming in.”

“Okay! Come on over!” he said and then added with a touch of humor in his voice, “but you may have to take me out for dinner as well.”

A couple of hours passed as Rick was kept busy getting a shower and washing up. It was easy for him because the nice maid lady had left a good assortment of clean towels draped over a holder. He was just drying off when the buzzer rang. It would surely be Debbie.

“Come on up,” he spoke into the wall microphone that clicked again as he released the button. He dabbed on some manly cologne just as Debbie arrived at the door.

Her dainty “knock, knock, knock” was barely discernible but Rick heard it and finished in his evening preparation by straightening himself and fluffing away some dandruff that had formed on his woolen shirt. As he opened the door there was an unmistakable smell of musk perfume in the air that was strong yet very exciting to Rick. He knew that more than likely she had dosed it on to attract him because it was certainly having an effect on him by the time he finally got the door all the way open and brought her loveliness into full view. The long soft cotton dress that she had on was full of colored flowering and it was stunningly accented by her long strands of brown soft hair that draped upon her perfect shoulder line.

“Hello! I see you have made it, and you brought some work along as well?”

“Yes, I did bring some for us to go over together if there’s time!” she replied. “There are some peculiar things about this case that bother me,” she said as if something had been brewing in her mind although she didn’t say more at the moment.

“Come on in! You can use the back room to change if you like,” Rick directed her after noticing the bathing suit and towel she carried in addition to her briefcase.

She entered the apartment shutting the front door with a “thud” and then headed towards the back room. As she went along she casually asked over her shoulder, “Can we take a quick dip down at the pool and afterwards maybe find a nice quiet place to go over some details about the case?”

“Sure,” he said. “The pool should not be overly crowded at this time of night. There should be some privacy there.”

Debbie disappeared into the back room and pretty soon emerged wearing a very skimpy string-like bikini outfit. As he looked at her while trying not to be too obvious with his stare Rick thought to himself how perfect the lighting inside the room would be for a snapshot of the young woman. She was a beauty all right, right down to the last strand of hair. Mother Nature had given her almost every benefit that could have possibly been sent into the genetic mix that the woman had sprung from. Rick stood at the table leaning against it while waiting for her to get the towels and pool-side gear which she quickly gathered. It was time for a swim he thought but tonight would be an extra special night for him because not only could he enjoy the company of a hot young babe while hanging around the nice atmosphere of the pool side but he could conduct some business as well. Perhaps he could find out what she knew about the case.

The moon lit the city on this cloudless night catching the two of them standing while looking out over a concrete wall that held up above the city street on the other side. They had just opened Debbie’s case full of secret paperwork after drying off from their swim and were beginning to study the case documents under the brightness of the moon’s light. Rick knew that before long the whole affair that went along with investigating a case was going to turn into a dangerous setting and he also had the experience from past years to know that most young investigators wind up quitting because of the related job hazards of the business. He’d seen many people come and go, most of them opting for the safety of a desk job. Finding a killer such as this would not be easy and would be dangerous to say the least. He knew that he could rely upon Becky to gather information but what about the other part? What about when it came to finding the psycho killer and bringing him in? Would she have what it takes to kill a man if necessary?

There was a slight breeze in the night setting and it caught Debbie’s hair and lifted it slightly to one side as Rick was mentally finalizing a preliminary profile of the man who was still at large and perhaps setting another trap at that very moment for yet another innocent person. As

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he glanced at his watch noting the lateness of the hour he realized it was time to bring this evening's business session to a close so he propped his notepad on the concrete wall for support and hastily scrawled out his thoughts in ink smearing his handwriting slightly as he signed the document and placed it in his briefcase.

The city down below had begun to slow its usual pace and was now starting to show signs of curfew recognition. There was an extreme stillness after eleven o'clock, one that seemed to accentuate every little sound from the street down below as the two investigators viewed it from their perch high above before disappearing back into the apartment for the night.

Across town there was a rural neighborhood that had grown out of the ashes of the gold dust days but now sprawled out for many miles at the edge of the much larger city and to be found there was a single professional lady that owned her own condo apartment. She had lived in the same place for many years but had spent the whole day working at her father's firm as a business consultant downtown and was exhausted from the day's work and the typically nightmarish drive back home.

Times were hard for her at the moment because recent events had orphaned a litter of basset hound puppies to her and she was now very concerned about their every day care while still trying to maintain her daily job at the firm. She had found that caring for the litter of three was worrisome to say the least. On this particular night she had just settled the puppies down for the night inside a cardboard nest and had finally managed to get the lights turned off. There was a timepiece that hung close to her half-opened window ticking away. She normally did not pay it any conscious mind as it ticked through her sleeping thoughts and sometimes even made her fall asleep but tonight for some reason it just ticked away inside her mind keeping her from sleep. "Tick, tock!" the clock clicked on and on until finally the ticking sound faded from her mind and she became one with the sleep world. Her body relaxed and she began to breathe in long drawn-out patterns as only a sleeping person will do, the puppies quietly sleeping at the foot of the bed in their very own sleep world as well.

An evilness that had crawled from the depths of hell or somehow

had been released from the boundaries of the pit had been lingering outside her window for some time now underneath a tall Douglas fir tree that provided him much cover from view. The man who was the embodiment of this evil was in his mid-twenties with dark hair that extended down to his shoulders. He'd whiled away the time since twilight by sharpening his scissors with an old-fashioned whetstone that he always carried inside his little black doctor's bag. He had the process of running his instruments of torture back and forth along the face of the stone down so smoothly that he made little noise during the entire procedure. Almost all of his surgical tools already had diamond blades placed on the cutting edges. Only his scissors needed some periodic sharpening and attention. It was a good time to think but sometimes invasive thoughts would just charge into his mind with a tremendous momentum, springing from somewhere that he could not explain for certain. His anger, he was certain, was only a passageway for the thoughts of demons. It was very similar to channeling a radio dial in order to receive messages from another place or another time. The man was called Damon during his normal day and the people that knew him referred to him as such but the voices that called him outside at night seemed to speak to a different person, one that had no name as yet.

The scissors were now quite sharp and ready to sever almost anything so he quietly placed them back inside his black medical instrument tool bag. He rested while lying on his side for awhile longer, pondering the idea of just how he was going to slip through the half-opened window. Time had provided a slit in the screen and it would be easy for someone to slip his hand inside the opening and to quietly move the double pane window along its slider to create a space large enough for a full-sized man to fit through. It was easy, and so he did it! The pane had moved with ease, no sound, nothing, as the woman lay soundly sleeping with the puppies at her feet. She slightly snored as the intruder made his way into her bedroom without notice. He turned to grab his medical bag from the window mantle and as he did he wasted a moment to look over his prize, the half-naked woman that had turned on her other side facing the wall with her back now towards Damon.

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This angered him. To his mind it was a sign from the other side. “She is being completely disrespectful,” he thought to himself and this idea repeated over and over through his brain. His victims were to face him at all times even during the ritualistic cutting procedures. “Hah, what gall! The channel is already beginning to proceed and look she’s not even opened up yet.”

“Just a moment, honey,” he mumbled as he went back to his case for a roll of duct tape and then returned to her bedside. “This is your greatest moment I know,” he quietly spoke in undertones while he placed the instruments very neatly around one side of her bed. Then one of the nearby puppies made a sound that almost sent him into a premature rampage. Damon hated impulsive behavior and to start the ritual without everything being perfectly in place, well that just infuriated him to no end. He was about to lose all of his self-control over those whining puppies. They just took him there.

The twisted man had finally completed setting everything up and had moved to the foot of the bed where he proceeded to strangle the life from each of the puppies. He thought it was comical how only a pair of fingers could take one out. The little dogs just went to sleep and barely moved during the whole ordeal. “It was too damned easy for them,” he kept thinking over and over again as the channeled voices grew stronger and stronger each time he killed another pup until at last they were all dead.

At last the time had come for the woman’s special moment. She began to awaken from the heavy breathing sounds he was making near her feet. Her eyes opened to the figure of a human being in her private bedroom area. It was only a silhouette figure of a man that was carrying a roll of tape but when he noticed she was awake he struck her with it over and over again until she became unconscious. He had cat-like stealth in his maneuvers and had her knocked out long before she could do anything to resist his aggression. Then he moved away from her slowly to study his work. The picture didn’t look good enough so he went back and punched her with his fist until she bled profusely from her head and body. Finally satisfied with his preliminary work he bound her with the strong tape and began the cutting ritual.

The next morning an investigator was inquiring of another who was working at the death scene, “No one nearby heard any loud sounds of a person being tortured?”

“No!” he responded. “The neighbor is an elderly man with hearing difficulties. He was sleeping and had removed his hearing aid.”

“But didn’t he hear anything at all through only a two by four wall?”

“No! I just spoke with the old guy. He liked the young woman and he’s pretty broken up right now. We might even be calling for another ambulance for him because he turned real white when he found out about her killing.”

Rick could clearly hear everything the men said as he stood back listening. He knew that the coroner would seek out every piece of evidence and would find many clues. He could read all the details in the lab report later on. Right now he was more interested in the method of operation that the killer had used to gain entry and where he had possibly been able to hide away long enough to study his victim. It was apparent that the window had been the main point of entry so he went around to the outside to search for clues. He started combing the area near the base of the window and ended up climbing halfway under the Douglas fir tree a short distance away where he discovered a small key! It wasn’t quite big enough to be a house key but more like one that might be used to lock a shed or some other outside building. “Oh, and look at this tree!” he thought. “What an ideal place to hide away, perhaps even to study another secretly.” He’d found a significant clue and also the hiding place the killer must have used to spy on the victim and now he knew that the rest was going to have to come out piece by piece from the research end of things. “There’s a reason for everything. Even if it’s inside a twisted murderer’s mind, there’s always a reason,” Rick thought to himself as he began to ponder about the possible motive the killer might have had for committing such a heinous act.

As he was leaving the scene he noticed the bagged body of the woman being delivered to the coroner’s station wagon through the front entrance and he felt bad for her and the puppies. “She must have suffered tremendously and probably wanted to die long before the

ordeal was over,” he suffered to think as he poured some gas to the motorcycle by hard-twisting the throttle which took him lunging forward upon it into the cluttered street ahead.

He was heading back to the office where he could gain access to the main frame computer. Once inside and on the internet he might be able to begin tracking the numbers on the key that he’d turned up at the site. The long freshly painted staircase led him up to the higher level where his office was located.

He barged through the doorway as a man would normally do that was feeling pretty raw inside of his mind. He immediately observed that Becky must already be here and that she’d responsibly opened the office on her own time because he could smell the aroma of a fresh brew of coffee heating on the burner.

“Hello!” she said as she greeted him from behind a standing partition that separated the office into two rooms. “Good morning, sir,” she reaffirmed another greeting and then her face appeared from behind. “It’s been busy around here and everybody in the world has been trying to get a hold of you, sir. Well, I had to tell them to call back later until Moe called and told me where to find you. Oh! Was it gruesome? The morning news said it was pretty horrible. I’m sorry, sir. I’ll shut up!”

“No!” he said. “You can talk about it.”

“Oh, no! I’ve said enough on the subject.”

Against her protestations Rick proceeded to fill her in. “Yes! Becky, every time I see something like I saw this morning it reminds me of my own mortality and everyone else’s and it scares the hell out of me.”

He then grabbed a cup of java from the coffee machine and sat back at his desk where he soon had his desk top computer fired up and heading full blast for an internet connection. Once the net came through and he was signed in he began punching in preliminary codes so that he might get into the Agency’s tracking files.

There were ways to find information on just about anything because the Agency had always been very thorough when it came to spying on people and keeping notes on just about everything and everybody. Rick knew that even his own past record could turn up if he wanted to

look hard enough for it. The papers were probably held in a classified file downtown somewhere but he couldn't say for sure.

An unknown page from the Internet Explorer suddenly popped into full view. Somebody was hacking into his computer! The desk top was an antique older model but he'd kept it up to date with Windows upgrades and there was no apparent reason for an invasion of his computer by anyone. Perhaps this invader wasn't just a typical hacker but one of a much higher intelligence. Rick was in luck today because were it not for his being hooked in to the Agency's network where tracking was automatically set into play when someone contacted his computer it would have been extremely difficult if not impossible to track down a computer hacker before he gained access to confidential information. Rick clicked on an icon that was labeled "tracer info" and an internet address popped up on his screen. Meanwhile the hacker came on the screen saying, "I noticed you at the palace of horrors today. You found something, didn't you? It was lying outside by the window. It is mine and I want it back! Do you understand? I'll be at the Greyhound bus station tomorrow morning around eight o'clock. Leave it inside one of the phone booths nearest the bathroom complex. Oh, and keep up the good work!" and then the screen went blank. Nothing more remained on the screen except the web address of a person called Damon Lane.

It all seemed to be so simple. In one single day Rick had discovered the web address of a serial killer and it had all come about because of a particular clue that luck had provided for him. Nothing had ever come this easily in his past experience and now he naturally became very suspicious about the current information that had so quickly been revealed to him over the internet. Rick sat back in his chair wondering if his new office hadn't been bugged because how could this guy have gotten into his data center to withdraw enough information from it to hack into his computer without another source involved. "No! That wasn't probable," he decided. "But how?" Pretty soon it came to him. Rick had used the victim's computer back at the crime scene and in so doing had revealed certain personal codes over the internet and somehow the killer must have been nearby watching the scene all along. Speaking to Becky in an excited voice

Rick said, “Becky, I need you to find me the signature on that Damon Lane web address. Call the host. Surely they’ll have something. I want a physical address and any other details you can get. Use your lap top computer, girl, and get on the net pronto, or if you have to call them then go ahead, but do it quickly!”

Soon Becky had a line on Damon and had his home address on her lap top’s screen. After some effort she’d managed to get it over a secured web line on the net. Becky had forgotten more of the Agency’s secret codes than most investigators ever learned in a life time and Rick was beginning to understand more than ever why Moe had assigned her to this case. He was starting to see her as more than just a pretty skirt and was starting to feel he could rely on her because she was intelligent and seemed to have a real knack for finding out certain details that others probably would not recognize to be so important. Beyond that he’d noticed that when she got on to something, whatever it might be, she didn’t stop until she finished the job. She did not look for ways to pass the job on to someone else. He liked Becky and was glad that Moe had chosen her.

“Bing! Bing!” Rick’s new cell phone went off. He looked down at his caller ID and saw that Moe was on the other end of the satellite link. “Hello, Moe. How you doing, buddy?” he answered.

“Fine,” he said and then immediately inquired of Rick, “but have you had any trouble with your computer recently? I mean, has someone been trying to hack into your computer? The reason I’m asking is that over here at the news room someone has destroyed practically all of our files on the recent killings over on Jay street. They have even wiped out the back-up files!”

“Yeah, Moe,” Rick responded. “I also have had an intrusion from a hacker although my office computer still has my downloaded copy of all of those files on the killings. I think the hacker may have gained access to my computer this morning when I was over at the Jay Street crime scene and I happened to use the victim’s computer. You know, the lady that was killed last night? I used her desk top. I think that somehow when I was on her computer a fellow named Damon Lane got into that link and followed it to my base file. He sure sounds like he could be the hacker and our killer. Without realizing which network

he was tapping into he got on the Agency's network and then the tracking software effectively did its job. Before he could disconnect it identified him. We've got a name and an address on him!"

Moe was quite surprised by what Rick had just revealed to him, "Good work, Rick! I'm going to have to see about getting you a raise, son!"

It was cloudy the following morning and the dimly lit sky held moisture aloft and shadowed the many Agency officers that were surrounding the faded old Greyhound building. The uniformed men were studying every entry way and possible exit escape from both inside and outside their positions. The policemen had already profiled Damon Lane. They'd earlier studied his picture and they could pick out his face in a crowd. It was now seven-thirty in the morning, just about time for the meeting. Rick had to place the key inside a phone booth near the restrooms. Damon had made it easy because there was only one single booth nearby them. "Tick, tock. Tick, tock," the time seemed to drag by as the minute hand on the bus station clock ticked slowly towards the eight o'clock hour. At five minutes before the hour Rick placed the key in the designated phone booth and then everyone sat back watching and waiting patiently for Damon to arrive on the scene.

The bus station was loaded with people at this time of the morning. On this particular morning it seemed like everyone in the nation had a reason to travel through Denver using the Greyhound service. It was twenty seconds to eight with no action on the key that Rick had placed inside the booth when suddenly just when everyone was about to give up a fire siren went off. It blasted the building and all of the anxious travelers inside with a pulsating sound that threw everyone into a panic. Many of them were screaming, "Al Qaida!". Others were yelling, "The aliens have attacked!" The whole crowd simultaneously ran for the doors and those that were in the area around the restrooms were packed there like sardines. The officers were temporarily blocked from viewing the key and by the time they were able to view the spot the key was gone. The cops had been smart though. They had never even tried to get into the crowd knowing it would have been useless. They just held themselves back in order to look for that single face amongst

the many faces in the excited group. The show was over for now and the people returned after a little while and once the police inspected the building it was back to business as usual. Most of the policemen were angry that there were no prisoners to shackle down and then haul into jail today. They were left with only a single name stuck inside all of their minds. Rick was angry as well and he decided to return to the office.

The motorcycle ride back to the office that normally seemed very long went by like a fast moving motion picture show as time crept onward all the while. His mind was now beginning to really focus on the Damon Lane case. Every aspect and detail about the case was taking on a new level of interest and nearly reaching a point of obsession for him. Before this morning the killer had just been a prize, merely a figment in his thoughts, but now he was becoming very real.

As he pulled his bike up close to the Agency building to park and was setting the stand on his Harley he heard sounds coming from the abandoned warehouse next door. He had often wondered what was inside this old building that could barely stand up against the pull of gravity after so many years of neglect but until now he had never had a reason to go in there. The sounds he had heard had been indistinct but the fact that they had come from an abandoned building alerted him to a possible distress situation and provided him with a good reason to look inside so he broke through the shadows of the broken door and went in to investigate.

Inside there were many tall posts that hadn't yet buckled under the weight of the upper floor while others were bowed along their whole length from top to bottom. It seemed as though the whole floor above could come down at any given moment. A trickle of brown-stained water smacked onto the concrete floor from above. The darkness was damp from the floor and a cool musty breeze pushed through the large empty space as Rick slowly stepped his way further towards the center of the structure. Off to one side of the vacant building but still on the ground floor there was a deep breathing sound as if some one was struggling. In the far right corner he noticed a small light that flickered much like a gas lantern would do from afar. He could see everything more clearly now as he wiped the city dirt from his eyes with his gloves

still on. There was a petite young girl with her mini skirt pulled way up around her waist and an older man standing behind her. He had a receding hair line and his bald head shone from a small beam of daylight that penetrated the darkness through a crack in the wall. They were sharing an intimate moment together. Rick glanced away once he realized the intrusion and he felt quite bad for invading their privacy because the girl was Becky! Slowly he strode along the dirty floor heading back for the doorway and finally he made it out of the place and back into the lighted world.

Shortly thereafter he made it back to his office. For awhile he sat thinking at his desk. Becky was an extremely attractive young woman and could drive just about any man crazy with little effort on her part. He could speak for himself that he'd been attracted by her looks many times over since she'd been working for him. It was hard not to notice those tight cotton mini skirts that she wore everyday but somehow he had managed to stay professional and not let on even though the fact that he still had the eyes of a young man was something he could not deny.

"She's still okay in my book," he thought. "Just learning the ropes of life in her own way," and so he decided not to let anything affect his relationship with her as a professional. It was not long before Becky showed back up carrying her lap top by the case handle. She smiled and went to her desk near the partition. "Becky, you have lipstick smeared on your cheek. It must be windy out there, huh, honey?"

"Mmm!" she mumbled but said nothing more in reply.

"Listen," he said, "Moe is getting the low down on that Damon fellow and we should know all the details by tomorrow. Maybe he'll surface even earlier, we'll see, but at this moment every policeman in the city is on the lookout for him and we're going to get him soon."

"Yeah, I think you're probably right. He sure made a mistake when he broke into the network's channel like he did. That was not very smart indeed."

Suddenly a noise came from the hallway and Rick went to the doorway to see. He said, "Oh!" and then let out a sigh and then sat back at his desk.

"Who was it?" Becky asked.

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“Just some fellow with a receding hair line,” he replied to her and then went back to work on his computer.

The world outside of the precinct had almost evolved into a self-governing entity because of the hard times. If a crime was perpetrated against a powerful person or someone’s relation thereof then there could be an Agency investigation on the matter but otherwise there probably would not be much interest put forward toward solving a crime. The Agency would simply turn a blind eye. Crime was much too high in the main parts of society to do anything other and they simply did not have the manpower to enforce many laws anyway.

On the brighter side of life there was Rick who still had his home in the mountains. It was a place where he could just disappear for awhile and safely sit back and listen to Mother Nature and sometimes to the Agency’s jets as they periodically dropped their bombs a far distance away against the peoples’ resistance. But as for those within the city who did not have the luxury of escaping to the mountains like Rick did many of them managed to find their own ways of separating themselves from the harsh realities of life.

On this particular night there was a crowd of people that had gathered underneath a tall bridge that spanned the distance over a creek. The bridge was nearly one-sixteenth of a mile wide and sometimes made creaking sounds from the weight of the trucks and vehicles that passed upon it. The chanting from the crowd was barely audible from a only a short distant away in the place where Damon lay hidden, shielded by the tall grasses. He was however listening intently to the ceremonies that went on under the big iron crossing while sharpening his favorite pair of scissors using the old whetstone.

“Rideon! Rideon!” they chanted as if they were summoning up a god from some far away place. “Rideon! Rideon! Rideon! Rideon!” the crowd kept on until finally every member was silenced by the rough resonant voice of the head person that carried farther than any other.

“We’re calling you back to this time in your natural state, Rideon. We are summoning you here and now to this place. Come! Come to us as you are our only god!”

All of the white robe wearers had different markings upon their

sleeves that probably indicated their status in the cult. Everyone stood around a medium-sized bonfire and resumed the chant ever more intensely.

“People!” a voice again broke through the chanting. “He went back into his own time dimension, don’t you all know? They only had him in the pit for a short while because he was much too powerful to stay in their captivity for very long. All the while he just wanted to study them and then after he was done with that he decided to leave Hell’s Pit in many pieces and everybody dead. Come, Rideon. Come back to us! Show us your immortal power to cross over the time level and dimensions and return here to us once again.”

The fire burned the darkened stick wood inside the flames and the ashes blew aloft from around the outside of the large fire cone that danced inside a rock perimeter, sometimes leaning into a slight northerly breeze as well. The members of the cult had been collecting together for years since the passing of their great and famous leader Rideon. Most of them believed he was a creature of the time dimension just as the last speaker had declared and that he had somehow been displaced into our time continuum for only a couple of our years and then finally caught inside a concrete pit where many scientists tried to study him. He ended up killing all of the citizens that were involved and a lot of the troops that were safeguarding him before he disappeared back into what most said was his previous time dimension. It was said by many people that he was an extremely evil creature sent from hell while others claimed that he was just an extraordinary being that was simply out of his place. No one really knew for sure. The cult had gotten wind of the werewolf-like creature at the time when he was being held captive and had tried to help him escape but they had been caught before they could accomplish the deed and most of them had been placed in jail houses and insane asylums for being extremely fanatical against the prevailing governmental ideas. That however had not stopped the cult from gathering from time to time to try to summon Rideon to their midst.

Damon still at the outskirts of the meeting place but growing more anxious by the minute wanted to meet some of the members. Finally he stood up and walked in to the site of the burning pit leaving his bag

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behind hidden in the grass for safe keeping. “Hello, people, my name is Damon and I want to join you,” he declared to them as if he really meant it. I, too, am a follower of the great Rideon! I know of his actions against the Agency and I believe, I believe!” There was not a soul in the crowd that really believed a word that he said but they gave him a listening-to just the same. They also allowed him to stay at their revival by offering him a chair.

“Sit down and join in. It’s all right,” one of them said. Some of the crowd had come from many miles away and had traveled by freight train mainly to be with the others like themselves and they wanted no trouble from anyone, especially the tall dark-haired man that called himself Damon. They were people from many different backgrounds and many of them had been disfigured through accidents at one time in their lives, the scars on their faces and bodies revealing their tough living status.

Dinner had long ago been taken off the tables and put away and Damon had missed out on the goodies and was getting hungry by now. He still had a few body parts left over in the medicine bag but that was over in the swaying grasses, and besides the people here under the bridge might not like his particular eating habits or the things that he normally chose to munch on. To say the least what he liked to eat would have been very disturbing most people. He kept feeling inside his blue jeans in hopes of finding just a leftover finger but there was none. He knew he couldn’t wait very long and kept thinking, “I have to eat!”

The crowd was beginning to disperse into the darkness that encompassed the small gathering of people that were still lingering around the dying fire. Most of them had gone back to a particular place where earlier they had set up their tents. It was good camping under the stars near the old whining bridge and along the bank of the flowing river that during the night emanated sounds up its steep sides into the campers’ ears making them sleep very soundly.

A buxom young girl, attractive yet kind of chubby, still remained at the crackling edge of the fireside where Damon sat beside her and tried to counsel her on the finer elements of life, something he claimed to be an expert on. It was obvious to Damon that she had been emotionally

disturbed early on in life. For one such as Damon she came as a pre-wrapped package, one that he fed upon. Sensing a weakness in her he coiled her up like a wind-up toy and before the fire had died that night she was crying in his arms saying, “Oh! Daddy never gave me this and momma bought me a second-hand car.” She went on and on until finally the moment arrived for everyone to go to bed as it was getting very late and into the morning hours.

“Are you going to sleep alone tonight?” Damon asked the girl.

She thought about his question for a moment and held still, not moving an inch. After a moment she whispered under her breath, “Come follow me,” and he did. Both of them wore dusty clothes and the soil blew from the fabric as they strolled away and disappeared into the darkness of the night together.

“What’s that?” she asked as the butt end of a pair of scissors stuck out of his back pocket and reflected light back to her eyes.

“Oh, it’s just an old pair of paper cutters that I use to make things with,” he replied with a slight undertone in his voice.

“Really! And what kind of things do you make?” she asked him, her curiosity half-aroused by now by the way he seemed to be avoiding her questions concerning the scissors.

“I make paper things, you know.”

She remained silent but went ahead and pulled back the canvas with the zipper attached to it that made for a door for her tent. “Come on,” she said, “the sunrise will come early for us.” Both of them piled into the tent and before long she began to undress down to her undies. In the darkness of the tent she didn’t look bad to Damon and above all she was very soft to the touch. Her blonde shoulder-length hair excited him as it gently fell across his chest while she kissed upon his neck sending an energy wave through his mind as she touched him.

“Give me a moment,” he said to her. “I must go outside for a time and sit by the river.”

“Fine! I hope I haven’t done anything, mmm, to offend you,” she said to his silhouette as he tore out of the tent and over to the river bank.

Damon had many concerns that he needed to run through his mind. First of all earlier in the day he’d sensed that he’d somehow been found

out by the police and he was sure that they knew his complete identity by now. Soon, if not already, they would have a long list of murders to tie together with his profile and many of them would surely be looking for him.

“Ah! What good timing this young girl has because she’s going to be my perfect cover,” he thought. “I can hang out with her and the clan and use them for support and perhaps once they get to know me better I can get many false alibis from them!” His big mistake had been trying to hack into Rick’s computer but at the time he been so wrapped up in the idea of getting back his shed key that he had mistakenly overlooked the Agency’s tracking capabilities that they had in place for all of their employees. “Damn! Damn!” he verbalized under his breath.

The girl was getting anxious and she started calling for him from the tent. “What’s going on out there?” he could hear her saying.

“I’ll be right there,” was his reply and he returned to her having decided not to kill her. He felt that he’d found a place that might even be safe for the time being and it was a warm and pleasant place at that. He knew that after spending a little time with him the confused girl would come to cherish him and that she could also help him hide from the Agency. What a perfect hiding place it was down here with the bums. Who would ever think that a computer-engineer-turned-killer would choose such a place to hide out? He could have traveled the world over with his offshore savings accounts but he chose to stay in his city and to live much like a bum, at least for awhile, or maybe even forever.

He returned to the girl’s tent and crawled in bed with her where he had sex with her during the night. The crown of the morning sun soon broke over the darkened horizon and cast light onto the troubled world from afar, bringing the city to a new light of day. The old bridge that spanned the flowing river hammered out noises from underneath as the cars above rocketed across it. The city’s dumpsters and early morning soup lines had already beckoned many of the hobos and bums to come stand in rank and file along a few of the cold sidewalks but there were many more that still remained down by the river sleeping.

The sound of bombing suddenly broke the morning calm and it was the real calamity of the time. It was a sign of the people’s unhappiness

with their world. The average citizen spoke badly of the movement in public areas but behind closed doors a different tune was sung. During a normal meeting by the secret movement many of the citizens would give money and sometimes even weapons to support the fighting against the Agency's armies. It was considered treason just to be at one of these secret meetings and yet thousands participated in the movement's outdoor conferences and the numbers of unsung martyrs that had died for the people's cause grew each time an outdoor meeting was bombed by the Agency's jets. For some reason the leaders of the Agency were not smart enough to address the people's grievances in any other way but with violence.

The bombing sounds startled the people sitting along the river banks and awakened most of those that were still sleeping. Damon had slept quite soundly until the bombing had started and then he awoke somewhat angered. He could hide his anger very well and decided not to express it to the girl as they both crawled out of the sleeping bag and got dressed. During the night he had crawled out of the tent still very naked while she was sleeping away inside and had retrieved his medical bag from the grasses. He had even taken the time to wash all of the instruments clean in the flowing river. She had just noticed the bag which he had placed in the corner of the tent. "Is that yours?" she asked as she was putting on some make-up.

"Yes, it is mine. I carry it because I have worked as a surgeon in the past and I feel vulnerable without it nearby. You never know when something will happen and I might need it," he went on to say.

"What do you normally do during the daytime hours? Do you have a job?" he asked.

"No! I have never worked in my life. I get money from my family. They are very rich," she said. "My father sends a check once a month to the post office and I am never late to cash it and besides that I also have my credit line." Then she stood back and unraveled a folder from her purse that must have contained thirty credit cards which she waved proudly.

"Are those yours?" he asked almost bewildered.

"Yes, they are all mine," she said while smiling back at him.

"But why do you sleep down here on the river when you could be

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resting on top of a feather bed? You know it could be dangerous down here, to say the least!”

She had to think for a minute before responding and then finally an answer came out from deep within her. “Well, Damon, I am a follower of the truth that lies within Father Hine’s writings concerning the deity of Rideon the wolfman. I am prepared to spend my life supporting the ministry even if that means sleeping on a river bank.” Her words had come out with a deep tone in her voice as if she had released a deep thought. Her name was Charity and Damon decided that the name fit her well.

“Is it alright if I stay with you for awhile, Charity? I have no place that I’d rather be than to stay here with you always!” he said to the naive young girl that wanted so much to be loved.

“Yes!” she responded quickly. “I want you with me forever.”

Some of the hobos had put out their fishing poles and were now sitting out on the river’s edge not far away from the couple. Once in awhile someone’s line would pull tight from a fish within the river and then a series of words would issue from the bums’ lips and would echo for some distance along the banks. Damon and Charity were sitting out in front of their tent palace watching the action as it went down and they decided they’d walk into town to get some breakfast using Charity’s line of credit for payment.

At a bum palace not too far away from their tent a camper who was already half-drunk sat out on a canvas fold-away bench tending a small fire. They walked past his site and when they’d only gone a short distance away from him he called out to them, “Hey, you two young people, where are you going? You can’t leave your site like this. Someone might steal everything, don’t you know?”

“Yes,” said Damon, “but you’d better not be around if they do!” and then he walked over to the hobo and glared at him straight in the eye. From the look that came into the hobo’s eyes it was obvious he needed to say nothing more.

Then he and Charity walked on down to a crossing where they found a tributary from the main river that would eventually take them downtown. The little creek that had started from the larger river turned in certain places but the concrete sidewalk followed along beside it

wherever it bent to and fro. The two late morning risers strolled along the concrete pathway watching the birds that would take off from hidden places that had provided them a nightly nest. As the two were drawn to the city by their morning hunger more bombing sounds fractured the morning air reminding them both that perhaps they were living in the last of times.

Meanwhile at the same moment at Agency headquarters Rick was reading his daily newspaper and enjoying a glazed doughnut at his desk. The phone rang and he answered it with crumbs still hanging from the sides of his mouth. Becky was watching from the side and she laughed at him as he went on talking until finally the crumb fell to the desk top and she silenced.

She had a special outfit on today made especially for “her men” and it had been tailor-made for her particular body features. It crawled into her flesh and filled her smooth and wonderful crevices just as it had been designed to do by its creator. Her personal tailor had spent a complete hour measuring every detail on her body in a secluded room at the tailor shop just so he could get every measurement perfect. Becky knew that she was a bombshell waiting to get her final moment of explosive action. She felt it was her job to attract men and to go even one step further by driving them crazy with lust. She knew that most men could be motivated by their carnal desires and then driven by them during their daily lives. Sex was a spark for mankind and she felt that she was helping out by dressing very sexy every day. Since she and Rick had started working together she had noticed a slight change in his attitudes. Early on in their relationship at the office he had been grumpy and somewhat withdrawn, quite naturally from spending too much time alone up in the mountains with no woman, but now he was changing. He was very easily excited and was much sharper during the day and dressed better as well. Becky sensed that she was the overwhelming reason for the changes in him but she never let on. She preferred to keep the kettle boiling and let him make all the forward moves.

Rick at the moment was oblivious to Becky’s appearance as he was still on the phone with Moe who had something on his mind concerning the Damon Lane case and wanted to cover all the details before the

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business day was in full swing. It had to do with tying all the murders together into one profile from a string of many killings. It seemed that Damon's method of operation could reveal a lot about his mentality and there was also the possibility that one similar killing might not belong to this case. Damon Lane's apartment had been fully staked out by the police very early in the day and they were waiting in the shadows and desperately wanted to bring him in. There was a lot of heat coming off of this case. Everyone's mind boiled because the sooner they found Damon the better off each and every investigator would be.

Everybody knew that the higher-ups would soon become impatient and then without a doubt would begin to dissect the precinct piece by piece. Some person would have to hang from a tree, even if he were innocent of the crime, or these folks would not be happy. Moe was getting uncomfortable and for this reason felt he had to talk to Rick more frequently. Rick knew that he would have to be Moe's victim because Moe was going to be a nervous hound from this point on but this was something he'd already grown used to dealing with.

"I've had enough for now. Just settle down. Bye!" Rick said into the phone and then disconnected the line. "Dammit! Won't that guy ever rest?" he bellowed out into the room.

Becky was there and she overheard. "Well he's nervous and he is probably getting the same kind of hounding treatment from somewhere else," she smartly interjected.

"Yeah! You're right, Becky! I should have known to expect this!"

Then she went on, "Ah! Just try to take it easy right now. There is nothing more you can do until more of the case unfolds. When that happens then you'll know what to do."

"Yeah!" he said and then went back to work on his computer. The clock was ticking from outside in the hallway and it was penetrating into Becky's mind as she was forging her way through her work with a pen that she was using to finish off some old files that lay spread out upon her desk and needed her signature.

Suddenly the sound of a car collision just outside on the front street assailed their ears and they both ran to the window to see.

"Huh! What a terrible accident!" Becky declared and she accidentally dropped her pen to the floor.

“Oh, let me get it for you,” Rick said but he was already much too late because Becky had already started bending over to grab it up. The tailor-made dress finally did a job on him as he watched the fabric of it slowly creep up her perfectly sweet bottom side and onto the top of her soft cotton panty line. And then while he was still dazed he couldn’t help but notice a tattoo that lay just below her panties that said, “GOOD TIMES!” which imprinted an image firmly in his mind. Finally she stood back up and looked again out the window opening with him. Rick bit off a chunk of his fingernail deep into the quick this time and the pain brought him back to his normal senses.

“What do you think?” he nervously asked her. “I mean about the accident. Was it the man’s fault?”

“Well,” she replied, “the man sure is yelling loudly at the poor woman that still is in her car but that doesn’t mean a damned thing, does it Rick?” she said jokingly and her words brought both of them to laughter.

“Hah! Hah! Yeah, you’re absolutely right!” Rick answered still laughing as he went back to his desk and once again pulled out the Damon Lane file. He started reading it and finding things of new interest in it. Becky’s side show had broken the spell of boredom that Moe’s phone call had implanted inside him and now he kept on seeing Becky’s perfect body in his mind’s eye and his lust pushed him onward hoping for the day that she might let him make love to her.

“Damon Lane, a computer engineer gone bad. Stranger things have been known to happen,” he thought. “Why would such a successful young man be interested in killing so many people, the full count as yet unknown? Already a preliminary count of fifty or so in a matter of only two years and the list is still growing. And where is Damon Lane now?” he wondered. “Could he have already left the country, perhaps by using someone else’s private airplane?” It was possible but Rick had a hunch that Damon Lane had not gone anywhere and was still lurking around in the city. It was just a gut feeling but those gut instincts usually turned out to have some truth. Besides, he’d done his job as an Agency investigator. He had uncovered the perpetrator so the rest was a waiting game and the next move was up to Damon Lane! “How well could he hide and for how long?” Rick wondered because he knew that

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someday the Agency would get him behind bars or maybe even kill him. There is a price for everything, even freedom for a time, Rick believed. A man could run and hide but as long as the Agency existed someone would always hunt for him.

It was nice down by the river as many of the cult members interacted with the bums and hobos that came and went through the area, traveling along the river banks during the daylight hours looking for things to eat and steal. If the campsites were full of goodies then there were certain to be many friendly hobos that might like to share in a drink or two but there always those hobos that had less than friendly intentions in mind from the start. Damon who had returned to the river bank after breakfast leaving Charity to do a little shopping in the city on her own wanted no part of the trend to socialize with the infiltrator type of transients and he moved away from the rest of the crowd to be alone and sit down by the riverside watching the currents in the flowing water steal a small twig away from a low-flying sparrow while the other people indulged themselves in foolish conversation with the drunken derelict hobos. He was growing tired of the river scene but wasn't ready to leave just yet as the evening was coming on.

The cult scene was coming alive because it was twilight on a Wednesday. This was a religious day for this bunch of people and they were bringing out the tables upon which many foods and other forms of offerings would be placed. Donations were accepted and a sign that hung off of the table read: "Five dollar donation highly recommended before eating" and some of the larger more trustworthy men of the cult assumed the job of overseeing the oncoming crowds. Small groups of readers sat on the river bank perusing their story books about the great werewolf Rideon and pronouncing passages from their books to the younger set of listener. Damon Lane enjoyed the setting and particularly enjoyed listening to the young ladies reading to the children just a few feet away.

It wasn't long though before the horrible sounds of war and from the bombings brought him back to his clear thoughts. It was hard to give up innocent memories of his faraway past that the ladies reading to their children brought back to him of when he was just a young child but the had bombing instantly shattered his peace of mind. Something

inside him needed to hang on to that memory of a place that he used to regard as his own personal playground. It was an old grade school where he once had many childhood friends, most of whom were dead now, lost to the war. These memories had for a fleeting moment transported him to another time but they also reminded him that he was from the other side of town, the part of the city that was constantly receiving bomb attacks from the Agency's air force and many of its soldiers.

Damon Lane had become a driven man who had been taught how to kill by the best of all the real-life training experts from his side of the line. Most of his early childhood years had been reinforced by the war making him into a man with little or no hesitation when it came to taking out an enemy figure. He never denied his orders that he secretly received from his leaders although he had thought about it many times. Yes! He had been ordered to kill a general's daughter and he had followed through with it. Killing her had brought him no pleasure even if she was the enemy's daughter. He knew that she had been innocent of any crime, short of being carelessly blind to the pain and suffering of others. He'd been a double agent for years and had spied on the Agency and all of the top men in many ways and in many places but never before had he been asked to kill someone of innocence like that. He'd often wondered why it wasn't the head official alone to be killed but the Resistance had wanted him to stay alive, perhaps for no other reason than to feel the pain that can only come from the loss of a close family member to war. The fighting had gone against the less fortunate in society. It was the rich people that had become so brainwashed with all of the Agency's lies and control mechanisms that they upheld the powerful reign that a few bad men held over and against the poor. With all of the middle class having been destroyed back during the great economic fall of the century only the poor people were left *en masse* to survive and they had an unwillingness to roll over and die. Seeing brother killing brother on the war front had turned Damon Lane, just as it had a lot of other men, into a vicious killer with little remorse for the dead.

Thinking of the killing machine he'd become gave him a sudden flashback of the latest murder he had committed to throw the Agency investigators off track, the woman with the puppies. He suddenly

wondered if after all the butchery he'd done he had finally lost it because although this killing had only been accomplished a couple of days before it didn't even seem real to him now but more like a bad dream in which he'd gone through the motions of killing someone and felt nothing.

Damon had no time to look back at all the murders that he'd done and besides it served no useful purpose to do so. He just kept blindly staring into his future for a day that would soon come for him to be dead. The visions that he sometimes had during his sleepless nights were about the only things that could catch up with Damon Lane at this time. He was a man running away from his reality because his nightmares had become much too unbearable for him. It was the same scene in every dream. He was always running away from something or someone until finally someone bigger and faster finally caught up with him and killed him.

Charity reappeared onto the scene. He spotted her crossing over at the narrow end of the river. Her extra credit cards had provided for a bag full of hard candies and some steaming hot hamburgers that she toted well above the ground, very carefully in her hands. Some of the hobos that hung around at this time of the evening but up river a little ways, down by the mouth of a small tributary that happened to feed off of the main river by using a wooden case structure that someone had built into an irrigation gate, sniffed into the air at the smell of fresh hamburgers as Charity passed them by.

"Come on, Charity. Don't listen to those guys down there. They only want what's in the bag," Damon said to her laughingly as she approached ever closer.

"What's in the bag is all mine, big boy," she replied with a smile still on her face and then started a frown for some reason. "You know those police down there in town were inspecting every person's belongings. They were out on the street asking to look inside my purse.

"Well, did you let them?" he asked her.

"Yes, I did, but only for a short look, and then one of them asked me my name and also scanned my hand code."

"You mean the one under your skin?"

"Why, yes! The machine that he had said that I checked out okay, otherwise I'd have surely been arrested. That's when I asked him about

the patch and how that stupid hand held scanner could tell him anything about me.”

“You mean he actually took the time to converse with you?”

“Yes! He also told me not to mention it to anyone else but that within a few months city hall is going to have a remote scanner installed on top of a very large tower inside the city and it will be able to instantly track anyone with a patch on inside the city limits. He also said that city hall is trying to get an ordinance passed that will make it illegal for anyone to be within the city limits without a tracking patch installed under their skin. It won’t be illegal not to have one, it will only be illegal to be within the city’s boundaries without one.”

“Tell me,” he asked, “how was your patch installed, Charity?”

“Oh, let me remember. They had a damned machine that looked like a big syringe and it planted the code under my skin and I didn’t feel a bit of pain. I remember my father took me when I was only a child to a public hall to have it done. He thought that I might get lost or something and wanted to be able to find me if I ever did.”

“You mean you were always getting lost as a young girl?” he asked her.

“No! The government promoted it. It all had something to do with immigration control back then and the cities wanted to stop all the illegal aliens from taking all the city’s jobs. Hah! What a big joke all that turned out to be.” Then she set the hamburger bag down and went into the tent for a minute.

“Yeah, I know. What a joke,” he replied.

The landscape was starting to become illuminated by the tall skyscrapers that reached into the puffy clouds that were passing through the evening’s twilight skies. Someone was playing a ghetto blaster nearby the community food table and the cult members were starting to gather around a new fire that the leader had recently started up.

“Everyone gather and bow your heads for a moment of prayer,” a man said to the audience as the wood inside the pit started to crackle providing a background for his voice. “We’ve all come here to be along the river of love to worship our great leader and our king the wonderful Rideon.” Then he grabbed one of the books on the table and started to read a verse from it saying, “When the world is standing at

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the threshold of doom and the bombs are descending onto my children I will return to seek vengeance for my pack.”

“Rideon! Rideon!” the members of the cult started to chant as the man continued to read from the book.

“There will come a great one that will change all of humanity and he will have a thirst for the blood of his enemies like no other man before him and he will alter the face of mankind. He will begin as a peasant and will rise thereafter to be the leader of a force called the Resistance. A great war will continue until the darkness has been completely removed from the face of the Mystic.” The leader then threw some magic powder into the flames that crackled at first and then exploded sending white smoke rising up into the air.

Standing in the midst of the smoke with his long sheet covering draped down along his form the leader started showering some of the women with a spray bottle full of cult water because they had chosen to become full-fledged cult members. “Ah! You ladies must come to my tent later,” he said. “You must receive the final blessing because only then can you truly be one of the Rideon cult. “Ah, shaman!” he yelled to the wide-eyed crowd that stood before him and then he called an end to the meeting by saying a final prayer which meant that the festivities were about to begin.

The celebration started when the final words were spoken by the leader of the Rideon cult. He was an extraordinarily tall man who had to bend over in order to look a normal person in the eye and he concluded his reading of the scriptures by projecting his voice in such a way that his final words could be heard throughout the river’s area and seemed to fall from a heavenly place onto the followers. Someone had a lute instrument and the magical sound of Beethoven’s “Fur Elise” drifted through the night air and everyone at the meeting place stood smiling as though transfixed by the enchanting music. Pretty soon an old man that looked as though he belonged to an angelical post started banging on a set of tall canvas drums, his silver mane trailing off to one side of his fast moving hands. He had placed his percussion section right in the middle of the cult and many of the cult members began to move along with the beat in dance maneuvers. The lights of a thousand lanterns held by followers lit up the nighttime air illuminating most of the surrounding areas all along the bike trail that followed along the

river. The trail had once been used in the past by a million bicycle riders for daily exercise but now had become the campgrounds for thousands of homeless citizens, many of whom became caught up in the spirit of the cult members' festivities. The spiritual man's drum beat evoked a pattern in the groups that were now forming everywhere all along the river's edge and a band of angelic-faced female singers brought out powerful microphones with amplifiers as well and began a list of songs that went on endlessly, filling the people with even more spirit and praise.

While the cult people enjoyed the music in a blithesome state the river was filling with canoe riders that silently paddled by the preoccupied party people and then slowly drifted downstream with the hundreds of Resistance fighters to where many more sessions had started to play as well. The canoe invaders crept by the partying crowds almost undetected for hours on end until the river banks were full of Resistance soldiers who allowed the reveling crowds to continue uninterrupted as they disembarked from their vessels with their weapons in hand. Many of the crowd were already members of the Resistance force. They had been placed there and had stayed along the river to act as sentries for the Resistance. The people's army had been gathering forces there for weeks in order to attack the Agency's downtown headquarters. They had selected some of their best men to act as lookout hobos along the river banks. Damon although involved in his separate missions was a member of the collection of highly-trained and skilled fighters as well.

Many of the camouflaged fighting men that now followed along with the current of the mighty river had just left the bunkers from the front lines of the war and thrilled at the sight of fresh food and the abundance of young women. The colonel of the forces rolled in with the last of the men and he steered his canoe onto the bank and then disembarked over to where his top sergeant had gathered some of his men nearby the picnic tables that were still adorned with food and where the startled cult leader now stood. "Hello!" he said. Don't worry. We're not here to harm any of you people. Just try to relax and further enjoy your evening because we are your friends and we wish you people no harm. We are part of the Resistance army and we have very important reasons for being here. No one can leave this river until

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daylight comes so tell all of your cult to stay along the river or my men will have to stop them using deadly force if necessary.”

“Yes, sir!” the reverend replied and he immediately turned and instructed certain cult members to go out and spread the word to everyone along the riverside that all of the people must stay along the banks and not try to go anywhere until morning or they would be killed.

“People listen up,” the colonel spoke into one of the microphones to the anxious crowd of homeless people. “We intend no harm to come to any of you. We have our reasons for being here tonight and it is not to harm any of you. We are fighters for your freedoms and if there is a wounded soldier nearby you then tend to his wounds. If you can feed him then give him some food because he may die tomorrow for your future and well being. He fights so your children can live with dignity and not as slaves to greedy and evil men that will see you all dead before they allow you or your children an ounce of freedom. Now, I want complete silence along these river banks lest you be silenced by my men and we’ll all get along just fine tonight if you abide by the rules. Be silent and have a good night!” he said. The p.a. system suddenly squelched loudly as the colonel shut it down and went back to the table where all the uneaten food had been left.

The reverend had taken off and was hiding in his tent over in the tall grasses where many camouflaged soldiers now stood all around guarding the area and watching over the colonel with exact detail. It was evident that their leader was important to them in more ways than just as an authority figure. Colonel Hans had a look in his eyes that only many bloody battles could have ever created and it was like taking a treacherous journey back in time to look deep into his eyes. He had a long scar that ran from his jugular vein on one side his neck and extended all the way across his tough face ending just short of his ear lobe. There were many other signs of war painted onto the khaki that Colonel Hans had worn everyday during his years of fighting against a much more technologically equipped enemy called the Agency. He had risen from just a common fighter to his colonel status by fighting alongside his soldiers. He was always to be found in the middle of the battleground amongst his fighting men whenever a battle ceased. The Resistance had chosen him to lead this mission deep into the city and far behind the front because they knew that Colonel Hans would get the

job done without any unnecessary killing of citizens. They knew that he would have his soldiers into the city and at the enemy's headquarters before the Agency could muster many troops in defense. His soldiers were the best and they would die for him.

"Damon Lane is it?" the colonel inquired as Damon approached him from the shadows of the night. "How are you doing, son?" the elder asked to everybody's surprise. "You made it!" he said. "I'm glad to see you are still alive. I read about your accomplishments in the paper. Job well done!" he said.

Damon answered him by saying, "I am here to join in the fighting with you, sir! My mission has been accomplished and I will help in any way that is possible."

"Oh! That is good news!" the colonel returned and then went on. "We are here to capture every person that we can collect from the Agency headquarters beginning tomorrow morning just after many of their leaders gather there for a meeting. Then it is my duty, if there is any time left, to destroy that damned tracking tower that they are trying to build close by the headquarters. As we speak there are privately-owned trucks and other vehicles that are being delivered to the streets out front and parked all around the Agency's main headquarters building. I've instructed some of my soldiers to look for vehicles with a red "X" painted somewhere along their outside door panels. Those will be the escape vehicles. The canoes will always be available and there is a drop-off point where they can take the captives two miles from the landing zone where we first hit land."

"You mean the place where they'll first start?" Damon was confused.

"Yeah," the colonel replied. "That's what I said."

Damon was still confused and asked, "Sir! Let me get this straight. Your men are going to float the canoes down the river early tomorrow morning and then they'll disembark down by the bend and from then on our forces are to attack the Agency's headquarters which is a short distance from there?"

The colonel replied with a strange look upon his face, "Yes, as wild as it sounds that's the plan. We have considered the idea of attacking them in this way for months now because it gives us quite an element of surprise. I mean, who would ever dream of such an idea anyway? Hah!

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Hah! I know it sounds crazy but, dammit, we might just pull it off. They won't ever expect to see us this far from the front," the colonel finally ended.

Damon Lane had been a freedom fighter for a long time before the Resistance started using him as a mole which was a job that he hadn't cared for very much. He'd had to put more than forty people down in the last two years and although most of them had received a deserving end there had been a few executions he hadn't liked performing in the least. He had been a soldier with orders during those missions but at this moment he had no pending orders although he sensed he was about to receive some from the colonel.

"Sir! There is one aspect of my prior mission that is as yet unfinished, and, with all due respect, may I go attend to it with your blessing?"

"Why!" The colonel scratched his head for awhile wondering whether he should order the young man into the fight but finally he said, "Here! I have something for you," and he handed Damon a bag full of dynamite. "Report to that dammed repeater tower and blow it up."

"And then what should I do, sir?" Damon questioned.

"Then get the hell out of there," the colonel said roughly.

Damon replied, "Will do, sir!" and then he turned away but just for a moment.

And then the colonel called back to him saying, "Are you sure, Damon?" He asked this question with a strange look in his eyes that gleamed with the stare of death in them.

Damon could not fully turn around to face his penetrating eyes and responded to the inquiry standing to one side. "Yes, sir! But I have an important matter I must take care of before I can begin my new mission," and then he disappeared back into the depths by the river's edge where he might find his sweet Charity for what might be one last moment they would have together. "Charity, it's me," he said as he stuck his head into the opening of the tent. "I have come to say goodbye!"

She looked disturbed as she lay in her bedroll but still looked at him. "When will I see you again?" she asked.

"I have your post office box number and I'll write you when I can. Good-bye for now, Charity. I'll see you soon!" he said as he dropped

the tent flap and was gone like the wind up to the shallow end of the river where he disappeared from sight.

The street lights of the city lit his way as he headed towards the inner parts of town following along the sidewalks and crossing bridges that led him deeper and deeper into a new vision of how he might change the world. Dawn was not far away and he knew that he had to reach his destination quickly before daylight came. The cool air of the night time penetrated through his thin Levi jacket as he walked deeper and deeper into danger. The police by now would most likely know him by his face and might recognize him immediately but he cared not as he continued on, walking forward as if on a death march. He kept thinking as he walked into the night, “Maybe there’s still hope for the human race and perhaps life really can improve for everyone someday.”

As he got closer to the headquarters area Damon saw that the Agency men were already pretty far along with the tall tower that would soon be able to read people from the sky. When completed it would be able to scan a person’s location at any instant if they were inside the city and it would be so finely tuned that it could place someone inside of any room at any single moment whether sleeping or otherwise. The code that had been placed inside of the citizens’ bodies many years before during the immigration control years would be able to send other data as well.

Damon could look up and see the evil that the tower would bring to the citizens and himself. It was magnificently tall, reaching for the clouds as if it had a good purpose. He could see it exploding the same way he’d seen many other structures go up and then come down in pieces. Blowing it up would be easy with the dynamite but the timing of it all must be right.

The sun was rising into another new day and Damon knew that he would soon see the eyes of his fellow Resistance fighters. There were big timbers and scaffolding pieces that held up the larger part of the unfinished tower and he went inside to find a hard hat on the floor and some gloves. Then he climbed up five stories to a level where he could look out and see the whole city and the river only a block away.

“It’s a beautiful river, isn’t it?” someone said from an edge of the tower where he hadn’t yet looked. It was an old man, Rick’s vehicle watcher. He spoke to Damon saying, “What are you doing up here?”

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No one ever comes up here since the beams were set days ago.

Dammit, can't a guy get any sleep around here, for Lord's sake?"

"Okay, old man," Damon returned. "Just be quiet for a little while and then you'd better be ready to get the hell out of here cause this place is coming down."

Then the curious old man asked, "What the hell do you mean by coming down?"

"Ahh!" Damon said and then laid down the bag he'd been carrying. "Look in it, old man," and he did.

Then the old guy spoke up saying, "I see you mean it, huh! Well, I've got to get going. This tower is an eyesore, anyway. Good luck with it, sonny." The old man could run pretty quickly when he wanted to and he quickly descended the vertical ladders and those that crisscrossed all along the sides of the soon to be destroyed tower.

The boards shifted under Damon's feet but this was quite normal for this particular type of scaffolding construction. He quickly accomplished the few preliminary details necessary to ignite the dynamite. A sparrow flew nearby his head as he peered over the railing barrier to look for the Resistance troops before making his getaway and sure enough they were just now coming onto the shore. It was a sight to behold in this day and age to be looking out on so many canoes. What was even wilder was that these were all modern-day warriors coming for a fight and as yet they had not even been detected by the Agency. As everything seemed to be proceeding according to plan Damon then quickly lighted the explosives and made his escape from the tower.

"Ka Boom!" The sound that stopped all of the city resounded for miles. At first the tower went up and then came crashing down onto the hard ground with nothing left of it but bent metal and some highly-protected electronic parts that would now be useless to the Agency. The Resistance men kept coming on and on as they rushed up the city block in large numbers and made it past the fallen tower and finally into the Agency headquarters while the rest of the camouflaged fighters surrounded the place from the outside.

The Agency employees inside the headquarters building were afraid and some fought the army soldiers. Others were smart enough to know when they were out-gunned. Rick had this figured from the moment

he'd seen the soldiers at his office doorway.

"Hands up!" a soldier said as he broke the barrier between Rick and himself and stuck his rifle under Rick's chin. "Get up!" the soldier said. "We're going to go see my boss."

Then Rick got to his feet and got smart with the soldier, "What do you mean see your boss?"

The soldier did not answer but gave him an order, "Turn around or I'll shoot you right now!"

Soon Rick was hand-cuffed and taken out with the others, out into the streets where they were loaded into many cars and trucks and selectively hauled away. Becky was not taken but was left behind because to their observations she was only a worker who mainly took orders from the Agency and the Resistance had no way of knowing that she was probably the most knowledgeable of them all.

The Agency had received word from a distressed janitor of the place that the world was ending and that the aliens were coming in to take everybody over. He was aging and couldn't see well without his glasses which he'd lost during a struggle for his broom earlier in the day. He had fought with a janitor from another floor and his glasses had become broken beyond repair. When the building suddenly filled up with soldiers, all dressed in green camouflage uniforms, he freaked out and called in from the basement level. The old guy hugged the phone tightly and spoke into it, "They're loading them all into the space ships right now and they have blown up the tower also. The aliens are here, dammit. I tell you they're here!" and then the phone went dead leaving the old man alone to fear for the world.

The Agency's air force was preparing to strike the area. The three jet planes would dive in looking for targets, awaiting clearance from higher places. Most of the Resistance had already escaped into the city's traffic when the helicopters broke out with gun ship fire catching Colonel Hans and some of his men inside the Agency building. The Resistance fighters that had carried anti-aircraft weapons onto the scene brought down two of the helicopters but the last remaining gun ship held back no longer and opened fire annihilating the crew and Colonel Hans who was hiding out in an upstairs office.

The pilot of the helicopter radioed the jet fighters saying, "Take out the whole building!"

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“Are you sure, sir?” one of the jet pilots asked.

“Yes! The whole structure,” the helicopter pilot replied.

There was a strange sound from high above in the air that resembled the sound of a hurricane as the Agency’s jets broke their holding patterns that they’d been maintaining for awhile now and broke into a fast dive. Then there was a tremendous vacuum sound that only lasted for a short second and then everything that was once the Agency’s headquarters became rubble as more and more missiles were released from the wings of the jets and dropped onto the target below.

Rick had been knocked unconscious upon falling headfirst into the side of a curb and had to be dragged by two Resistance soldiers into an escape vehicle. While he was lying in the back seat of their old Galaxy 500 the two soldiers drove him quickly into the morning traffic towards their side of the city where the “forbidden zone” lay.

The “forbidden zone” had existed for many years and its borders had moved back and forth as one side of the conflict regained territory or lost it to the other side. It was a place where anything could happen at anytime and it was also a place where no rules applied. The armies had taken a ten-mile stretch out of the city and had turned it into this hell area. Dust and broken concrete now lay where some buildings had once existed among the others that had withstood against all odds and remained erect, only partly torn down now. It was also a very good place to transfer prisoners.

“Let them in,” said one of the guard soldiers at the street entrance where no one who valued his life dared cross unless he belong to the Resistance.

“It’s more of those damned prisoners they are bringing over,” the taller of the two guards said to the shorter one and then asked him, “How many prisoners do you think they got?”

The shorter guard replied, “I’ve counted fifty cars so far and there might be more coming across.”

Then the taller one asked, “What are they going to do with all of them?”

Trying to avoid lying but not wanting to go into the details of the hardships the prisoners were likely to face the other guard responded, “Oh! They will probably want to die in a few days. Most of them anyway, I do imagine, but there’s no way of telling for sure. Hell, they

might even trade them in for some of our boys!”

Then one of them spotted something in the air, “Hey, here come some jets. I can see them coming in at about two o’clock. Hurry! Let’s get some cover!” and both guards ran to an old beat-up shack that was awaiting them near the road. It was tough and they knew it could take just about anything. The air fighters swooped in low and left a sonic boom in the air as they flew onward leaving the shed untouched.

One of the guards fired at the F-16 fighter-type jets for a moment and then the other stopped him saying, “Don’t waste your shells. They’re already gone!”

The old Ford car rumbled and moaned as it pulled its weight combined with the weight of the three men inside it forward taking them far beyond the guards in the shed. The two soldiers in the front seat were talking when the front tire of the old car hit a length of cut wood which disintegrated flying into a million pieces in all directions. “I’m going to have to learn how to drive one of these days,” the driver said to his partner.

The partner replied humorously, “Yeah, but you drive better than I do! You see I can’t ever seem to miss anything in the road.” Both men laughed as they headed deeper into the “forbidden zone”.

Some of the street people that had been hiding in the outlying areas arose from the rubble and looked on as the car plowed through the desolate places and followed the bomb-stricken road deeper into the zone. The rubble piles had been occupied for years and housed the shattered lives of thousands of people that had endured on and on through the misery that had come with each new day of living. The “Rubble People” had eyes that revealed with a single gaze the years of pain and torture that had come to them over the seemingly endless time that the war had mercilessly continued on. Not long before these people had been considered average class citizens but their lives had quickly fallen into a downward spiral in just a few years’ time because there were no longer any middle-class levels in society. The Agency had seen to that.

The “New World Order” consisted of a group of fanatics that had efficiently executed elected officials and positioned much lesser dignitaries of their choosing in their place and their political affiliations were tied to one extremely wealthy and power-hungry man whose main

objective had been to eliminate the middle-class levels from all of society. Rising fuel prices had contributed to the chaos because everything that needed transport also rose in retail pricing. The average man simply reached a point where he could not pay the bills anymore. Then the government quickly outlawed bankruptcy, removing yet another freedom from the citizens. Banks took the initiative and were allowed to destroy peoples lives with a simple click of a pen. The disappearing middle levels had to struggle for their very existence as things worsened with each passing day with no end in sight. The corrupt government became increasingly efficient at rigging each election by providing their own counting and poll systems and a long string of bloodthirsty politicians pilfered the lives of others without just cause or any kind of control. The killing mounted into epic proportions as corruption grew inside the police forces as well. They used political demonstrations as an excuse to hunt and kill certain activists that stood against the tyranny that was unfolding as the separation between the richest and the poorest grew even wider. Removing good people from powerful positions had been easy from then on and was done by destroying their financial lives in various ways. The days of the average man as a free person were completely eliminated under the Agency's reign. A new and much different world order quickly evolved leaving the old one far behind. There simply was no turning things around for the poor because the good years were long since gone. Because these people were supporters of the Resistance against the Agency their lives forever hung in the balance between good and evil.

During the wee hours of the night and into the early morning the "Rubble People" were known to sneak across the patrolled front lines of the war zone over to the safer streets of the inner city where food could be obtained from missions and other sources. It was dangerous to cross over to the Agency's side of the line and if caught in the act the penalty of death was usually rendered by a firing squad but only after subjugation to the torture of some grueling interrogation sessions that made death seem like an act of mercy.

Rick felt his battered skull for sore spots and bloody masses. No fresh blood dripped into his hand as he had expected. He found only a swollen injury on the top of his cranium. His hands had been freed by his captors and he had been allowed to move freely in the back seat of

the old Ford car as the quick turning maneuvers of the driver tossed him around. He moaned slightly but said nothing as he studied the two men in the front seat through his blurry eyes.

“Do you think they’ll kill them all?” the partner questioned the driver.

“No!” the driver replied. “Many of them I’m sure will be subjected to some stringent interrogation because some of them may declare that they want to join us but it’s very difficult to determine with any certainty which ones are serious because people can lie very well while under pressure and fearing for their lives!”

The driver then interjected with a question, “Have you forgotten how you became a Resistance fighter, my friend?”

“Well, all I can say is their fate lies in their own hands,” the partner said and both men nodded their heads together.

Rick was somehow reassured that his life was not in immediate danger although doubts kept creeping into his mind as the lights from the front lines began to draw nearer. He could see the tracer bullets traveling for miles, or so it seemed, as they tore into the fabric of the darkness and finally reached a faraway target. The front line as always experienced sporadic gun fire all along the DMZ. It was a place where at any given moment the enemy could appear out of a shadow hidden amongst the rubble with an agenda to kill anything that remained alive. It was this killing zone that separated the two populations of the very rich and the desperately poor people. The separation between the masses had been brought into full light as the level and development of extreme terrorism had grown ever more intense and pronounced among the common people and the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness had been slowly taken away from the middle class.

Evening finally arrived and with it came a shock to Rick’s reality. His recent kidnaping had revealed another side of the war that he’d never really seen. It was a vision of the war that his side of civilization had never really wanted to see anyway! In a very strange way his eyes had been opened to another level of the news. “How in the world could he tell the real truth to those close-minded people on the other side of the city? They simply wouldn’t want to hear about it anyway,” he thought to himself as he looked out and saw more hungry people from the rubble looking on.

RIDEON

The old Ford finally came to a stop nearby a tent encampment that had soldiers patrolling the grounds. Most of them carried side arms strapped around their waists although a few had rifles. This was a place behind the front lines where fighting men and women could relax and get some recreation. The two soldiers in the front seat gathered their rifles and slammed the old Galaxy's side doors after parking the vehicle near a major tent in the middle of a massive conglomerate of others.

Soon a gray-haired man came out of the tent followed by other soldiers. He motioned to them as he spoke, "Get him out of there. I want to speak with him."

"Yes, sir!" one of the Resistance soldiers replied immediately. The car's rear door resisted slightly and gave a slight bang as he opened it due to an old dent in it that had never been repaired.

"Out! Out!" another of them spoke and then grabbed Rick by his jacket sleeve and pulled him out forcibly as if he were already putting up a fight. They took him to the main tent where the officers were all sitting around a very long wooden table anxiously awaiting his delivery to them. The group of soldiers that had brought Rick to the meeting now firmly held him by both arms in the front of the table as the Resistance officers looked down from their higher positions at the rear. Perhaps this was judgment day for Rick and his day to die after all, but for what crime?

The men of the "courtroom" sheltered an inward silence and stared at him as if they were seeing right through a glass window. It was easy to see that this wasn't the first meeting of this sort that they'd held. Someone threw a chair onto the dirt floor next to Rick breaking the silence.

"What is your name?" one of the officers asked of him.

Rick looked at each member for a moment and then gave the one in the very center of the group a blasting glare before reluctantly responding, "My name is Rick Allen."

"Ahh! The reporter," replied the man in the center of the tent room and everyone laughed as if they had been already expecting him.

"What's so funny?" Rick interjected.

"We have been awaiting your arrival!" the same man spoke and then went on to say, "You are going to be our inside man or you're going to be dead. That I can promise you. We need someone inside the

Agency's infrastructure--someone very smart! If you value your life you should consider very carefully what your course of action will be because it has been our policy to go to any length to kill any one who cooperates and then later changes his mind. As you know we are a vengeful outfit. If you decide from the start not to be one of us then you will be put to work inside one of our camps. You know, the places that the Agency calls the death camps?"

"Yes, I know about them," Rick replied.

"You will cooperate until this war is finished even if your chosen fate is to die inside of a death camp." The leader of the pack spoke with a deep voice that seemed to lessen in intensity as he went on. "Rick! We are going to give you one single day to decide correctly and while you are thinking I will assign a personal attendant to host your time at our lovely battle front. His name is Damon." The leader motioned with his right hand to one of the attendants to open the hard plastic tent door and in came Damon Lane through the threshold.

It was cold in the evenings all along the DMZ. There was a fence line torn to pieces in some spots and intact in others. It seemed to have no function other than to provide a place upon which to rest a rifle. Most of the Resistance fighters had been supplied with M-16 rapid-fire weapons although a few carried M-60 tripod-mount machine guns that could level a building in no time if need be. The time to level a building had been earlier in the day when the fighting was intense and many lives were lost. Now was only a moment to rest for most of the men.

After his brief introductory session with the Resistance officers Rick was released and allowed to roam freely amongst the myriad campsites that lay scattered all around. The sound of clanging pots and pans echoed nearby and a slight wind crept through the camp area. A full moon lit up the night time sky and a shadowy figure followed close behind Rick's every step. There were broken objects all around the region, tall enough for a man to hide behind while stalking someone. Mangled automobiles were even part of the scene. Rick knew it was probably Damon tagging along in meandering advances and he had the additional knowledge that it was a cold-blooded killer that was following him which didn't set well with his nerves in the least.

A scrap of metal that was flying in the wind came crashing to the ground in the area where Rick perceived the intruder to be hiding. It hit

on the corner of the abandoned car making a loud metallic sound. This brought Damon's head around the corner long enough to reveal for certain his identity. "Uh huh! I thought it might be you," Rick spoke loudly enough for the other man to hear over the slightly wailing wind. "Come on over if you like," Rick said even louder so the other man could hear his words even if he was hiding behind an automobile.

"Why should I come out to talk with you? You're the man that blew my cover on the other side. Because of you I was almost captured by your associates who most certainly have it in for me now," the man replied, speaking strongly in an angry tone from behind the wreck. Then there was a moment of silence before Damon spoke again. "I am tired of killing your kind. Don't you realize that it has been my only job?"

This intrigued Rick and he questioned the shadowed man, "Your job that you are so very good at has cost over fifty people their lives. Don't you think that perhaps you have done enough killing for the cause? Can you live with what you've done?"

Damon cleared his throat taking a moment to think before replying. "No, I cannot! Death will be a relief when and where it comes to me. I have given my soul for the cause just to kill people like you. There is no bright side to the picture of my life. Only death do I always see."

Rick could only consider the words that the man said. Both men remained silent and in deep thought before Damon spoke up again. "You'd better get back to the tent area. As you see I am tired of tracking you around. It would be much easier for me to wound you in some way and then you might stay in one place throughout the night."

Rick knew that the man in the shadows was a killing machine that was now being nice in his own way and he'd also decided that he had little chance of escaping from this place alive so he decided to cooperate for the time being. "You're right. I must stay in the tent and while I'm in there I will consider my options very seriously but I already know what I'll say at the session. There is no doubt in my mind what will be my choice. Throughout the night you need not concern yourself, my friend. There is no escaping from here. I know that. There are simply too many men out there on guard and they are all good fighters. To say the least the Resistance fighters have survived by being better at hand-to-hand fighting than the better supplied armed men of the Agency's

army.” Pretty soon both men returned to the tent area for the remainder of the evening.

By morning some of the Resistance soldiers had gathered outside Rick’s tent and their talking awoke him from his sleep.

“Come on, mister, wake up,” he heard one of the men saying from outside the green army tent. “The colonel is waiting.”

“Okay, give me a minute,” Rick responded. Soon he was dressed and ready to go meet with the colonel and the council. He stepped outside and the other men collected around him as if he might run from his moment of truth. “No!” Rick said. “I won’t run from you. Not now!”

The officers were already sitting in their chairs when he arrived at the place of doom, the same place as the prior evening, right in the center of the tent encampment. He remembered his position at the Agency’s headquarters from the day before where the bottom had dropped out of his life. He was watching the colonel’s every move from his location inside the sentencing pit when he observed that the colonel looked like a wise man, certainly smart enough to lead these men into war. He felt that the Resistance fighters would probably do anything for the old gray-haired man. It was only a gut feeling that he had but nonetheless the thought was still inside his mind although he didn’t know this for certain. The colonel wore a hat that displayed a symbol. It was a silver eagle that he’d worn in a much different army. That armed forces was long gone and dissolved away but it had given him some legal training and superior respect for his fellow man even though this meeting was not legal. “Well, have you decided?” the colonel asked him.

“Yes! I certainly have, sir!” Rick replied.

“And what is your decision?” the colonel asked.

“Go to hell!” Rick yelled at the top of his lungs and kicked at the officers’ table while struggling to get at the bunch.

“Take him to Camp #1 and see to it that he doesn’t get away,” the angry old man blasted out at the young soldiers that were now rushing in to restrain Rick. It took four of the fighters to get him down and hand-cuffed but while he fought them he kept yelling profanities loudly until they knocked him unconscious with their fists.

“He’s quiet now, sir!” a burly soldier said over his shoulder as they

carried the wounded reporter outside the tent and then loaded him into an awaiting jeep with a readied driver. The spinning tires of the old Willy's style jeep kicked up trails of dust as they took Rick away towards Camp #1. Still unconscious Rick had fallen halfway out of the vehicle's back seat and his head was on the floor of the vehicle.

"He should have listened," said the colonel to one of his fellow officers.

"We could have used him," the junior officer replied but the colonel did not hear him as he was already re-entering the tent to prepare for another case. Suddenly the junior officer noticed the smell of passed gas that the colonel not so subtly left for the junior officer to endure before rejoining him in the tent.

The Agency had adopted a policy many years before to get rid of the crippled country's *Articles of the Constitution*. Rideon Voil was the true leader of the regime by now. He'd already killed most of his enemies at all of the political levels and his puppet leader the president-elect was under his complete control. Voil used his ESP channeling as a control mechanism to gain power and to dictate executions to empty select benches and slots in the old government. He was the first to successfully rise in the chain of command using his controlled style of execution. Soon after his rise all of the good government leaders had quickly fallen to the gun.

Then the *Articles of the Constitution* had been removed from the public domain and then stored away in a dark empty basement as if they no longer existed. The public had been told that the documents had been destroyed in a terrorist bombing attack but that was not true at all because the Resistance leaders now held the *Constitution* in their possession and it was under the peoples' protection day and night. They had regained it during the last raid on the Agency's headquarters where it had been secretly discovered by a half-blind janitor that was still sympathetic towards the Resistance. The tide was beginning to turn for the Resistance and maybe at last there would be better days to come.

Rideon Voil was a very unique individual who had appeared onto the scene soon after the Pinkman Institute was demolished by a leaky natural gas line. The people had only known of what the Pinkman Institute was supposed to do whereas the actual truth about the place

had been held in complete secrecy. It had been a site for many oddities and strange creatures of all kinds to be studied by mad scientists with the goal of gaining various kinds of scientific information. If a creature could speak, and some of them had been capable of speech, then the end result had been torture. While in his human state Rideon had been subjected to rigorous experimentation many times by the others but somehow it had been the professor that had unraveled the mystery of his changeling capabilities. A temporary cure had all come down to one simple DNA answer and Pinkman had been the super-genius that synthesized a drug which would allow Rideon to control his werewolf metamorphosis during the full moon cycle and otherwise. Rideon Voil was now a full human who could change at anytime to become a werewolf. Pinkman even helped him gather a fresh new identity before his own unfortunate demise. The new identity for Rideon even included real-life parents who had tragically and mysteriously died by horrible mutilation one night.

The beginning of the end had finally arrived. In little more than a decade Rick had watched the world evolve into a battle zone. It seemed to him like it had been only yesterday that he had been little more than a youngster fishing at the lake nearby his late father's house and there close to the water the world had been a marvel to his youthful mind. His dreams had been so wonderful, filled with visions of excitement, but now his only thoughts were for survival.

He was presently incarcerated in Camp #1 which was considered to be the most rugged of all of the Resistance prison camps put together. It had all of the worst aspects including regular genocide of the weak and sickly people. The prisoners were taken outside of the high fences by the armed guards during the daylight hours to do hard labor and usually returned home again at late dusk just before darkness fell. Men, women, and their children were flogged with heavy leather whips for being too tired to get up and continue. Regular meals were an unusual feature and good food came only to those that spied on the rest of the captives.

The tower that overlooked the entire prison was always manned by at least two guards and at night one of them constantly wore special infra-red headgear so that he could see into the shadows looking for escapees or intruders. They had scanners on their weapons that would

seek out heated bodies and beep upon detecting them at close range and sometimes these guards would even use the warm bodies for target practice to make sure their rifles were properly sighted.

After only one week's captivity at this prison Rick had already been assigned to a bomb collection detail which he performed during the daylight hours outside the prison walls. This was very dangerous work and not a moment passed that he did not think about the blessing of freedom. He found that it was one thing to report torture and pain in a newspaper but quite another to experience it.

Bombs presently flared far off in the distant void loud enough to cause the tower attendant to mumble and the prisoners down below to cry out. It was normal for lights to periodically pop in the sky and for a thundering sonic boom to follow shortly thereafter.

"Yeah, they are starting up again!" one of the tower guards said to the other. Then another bomb blast followed that shook even the tightest of tent fabric and the smell of gun powder filtered within a slight breeze and wafted through the steel fences.

"What are we going to do if they bomb over here with the jet airplanes?" one of the voices could be heard to ask from the basket up high in the prison lookout tower.

"Die, like everybody else!" the other returned.

An eerie feeling, almost like a presence, suddenly came over the men in the "bird cage" and the whole camp felt it as well. Even the prisoners fell silent for the time being. It was like a cool blanket of karma had passed over the whole face of humanity at that very moment. As suddenly as it had started the bombing had ceased and for no explainable reason there was a sustained moment of silence that penetrated the consciousness of every creature on Mystic. Not even a single mouse moved anywhere on the planet Mystic. Every man, woman and species of animal somehow knew exactly what had happened because a higher power wanted them to understand.

"It felt like something good just went away!" one of the tower guards spoke.

"Yeah! I felt it also and it made me want to cry," the other one returned as the silence continued on until at last it was shattered by loud screaming voices. This strange occurrence had an instant effect on the prisoners in the yard as many fell to the ground and began speaking

in tongues. A great light appeared above the Mystic from deep in the heavens, even deeper than the stars, and it was so bright that every human on the planet Mystic could see it very clearly. It lasted only briefly, but long enough for every human to know. Everyone sensed deep inside their minds that a good spirit had been removed from the face of the Mystic by a much greater power indeed.

The next day the President-elect of the Agency decided to put out an immediate address to the whole world via satellite and the nations listened in to his speech. "People! Some of you may have noticed a light phenomenon in the sky last night. Do not be alarmed! The aliens that visited us many years ago have assured us that we are not to be alarmed by these sightings in the heavens." He paused for a moment. "I have been told that an alien ship suffered a major explosion while traveling through a worm hole deep in outer space and the electromagnetic waves from it may have had a strange effect upon your mental state. Do not be alarmed because the psychological effects will surely pass soon and everyone will return to a normal emotional state. Thank you! Get well, and have a good day!" was all that he said and then he backed away from the microphone and waved his hand as he retreated through a set of double doors that were guarded by special agents.

The centralized government that the Agency created that had evolved over the years was now becoming weaker by the day. It was being held together only by threads and money. It had become scattered into many parts and fear and terrorism had become its only source of control over the masses. The President-elect knew that this was true yet said nothing of it nor spoke about the current state of the nation. He was too afraid to say anything that might provoke other powers inside the infrastructure of the Agency. He had a family to protect. The system had destroyed a good man's honor and the evil forces within it had ultimately created a puppet regime and very few of the citizens could perceive or envision what the resulting ramifications would be.

The country's borders were constantly being overrun by non-citizens that would work for little or no money and the government was structured to allow the business man to hire the illegal workers providing a loop hole in the laws that allowed them to escape paying

many income taxes. Unemployment over the years had ultimately grown to dynamic proportions as the middle class was gradually eliminated leaving a huge gap between the nation's classes, eventually causing a revolution to break out.

CHAPTER 10

The paper boy that was shouting on the street corner deep in the inner parts of the capital city was starting to lose his voice from yelling much too loudly all day long. He kept trying anyway because the crowd wanted it and his shrieks kept coming with every bit of wind that he had left in his lungs as he shouted: "The end has come! The end times are upon us, people! Two bits, two bits, read all about it! Get your paper here! It's all in the news!"

Damon had happened onto the scene and could hear the paper boy from a short distance away still trying to yell loudly with his half-broken voice, much in the same way many of Damon's past victims had tried to vocalize their terror after losing muscle control over their freshly opened and bloody throats. For no reason that was apparent to him he stopped on the paper boy's little piece of pavement to listen for a moment. It was a mystery to him why he'd just stopped dead in his tracks. He just did it and his eyes went blank, for only a moment, but long enough to experience an involuntary reflection from his past assignments.

"I hate it when that happens. Those horrible flashbacks get me every time," he insanely thought to himself as he stood there motionless watching the smug business crowds strut by. Most of the pedestrians that went past him paid him little mind except for the occasional female who couldn't help but notice his strikingly attractive appearance. Damon was a tall white Caucasian man. He was still young, only in his mid-twenties, and he had long dark hair that dazzled the ladies, some of whom he knew he could easily kill without hesitation if instructed to do so. He had many scars upon his body but most of them were old wounds that lay under his clothing except for an unmistakable slit that revealed itself on his neck just above his shirt collar. He'd stopped trying to conceal it many years ago. The old wound was forever a part of him. Why hide it? There were times when he looked in the mirror

and did not really care about it. The scar was only a memory now, one that he had long since outgrown along with its resilient fear factor.

Damon was a stallion of a man and could not help noticing a brilliant-looking young lass that was sitting on a nearby street bench and reading a book on this perfectly warm sunny day. Her face was so pretty and only partially concealed under her long blonde braided hair as some strands of it sparkled in the afternoon sunlight. Tears came to his eyes and a deep feeling of emptiness crept into the depths of his being upon the painful realization that he could never have a beautiful creature such as this in his life for more than a few seconds and that he would live his life forever lonely.

He'd spent too much time with the war believing in what the war mongers had told him. There hadn't been time to spare a single thought for his own life. He'd given every ounce of himself to the cause of fighting against the Agency but now something was changing inside of him. Was it wisdom that comes with age that was showing him that life had played a rotten trick on him by turning him into a cold-blooded killer for no real reason? Was the end coming soon to all of humanity no matter how many people he had destroyed in his past? Had any of his assignments really make a difference? His mind was riddled with all these questions as he watched the young beauty on the bench and his flashbacks receded.

Damon had grown tired of being what everyone else wanted him to be. Other peoples' anger had forever changed him inside, yes, indeed! At his birth, life had given him a perfect clean page to believe anything that he wanted and then the war had come along and laid a gray shadow upon his living soul and then all the propaganda had deserted him leaving him alone to fight with his own demons within the shadows that lurked inside of his mind. But could he change? Did he have a chance to have a free mind and a conscience that he could live with like most other humans? Never! Other men had done the killing for this bunch of blind innocent people and he was one of them he figured. But he longed to be with the young beauty as he left her to finish her precious book uninterrupted, still sitting on the bench all alone. He moved to a place farther down the mall and found an empty chair to continue brooding about his life.

The sign of the times became even more obvious as the young paper

boy now changed his sales pitch. A new edition of the local newspaper had just been delivered to his corner in a brown canvas bag that lay sprawled out half-opened to the breeze that carried the stink of pollution with it into every space on the mall. The tired newspaper boy was again yelling with his half-broken voice saying, “The day 666 is almost here, people! Come and get it! Read all about it in the second edition of the day! The paper says the day 666 is almost here! Come and get it in the second edition!”

Damon enjoyed sitting here in this place and listening to the paper boy hustle. It was a free-society location where normal people gathered to shop for luxury items such as designer clothing and over-the-counter merchandise. There were no bombs here to disarm, no shooting, no one to kill, only people here in this place that were more interested in what kind of garment they’d prefer for a special occasion or the like. Sure there were locations on the Resistance side of the world that could be considered to be somewhat peaceful places but the war and all of its propaganda usually distorted them. There was no escape on the other side of the fence. Life there was all about the conflict.

As he sat there on the mall almost asleep now a cloud cover had crept over the region and cast shadows upon the city. The people seemed to be leaving for some strange reason. Even the young blonde girl had suddenly left as the streets began to empty. Eventually just h and the paper boy remained.

“What’s going on, boy?” he asked the young fellow from afar and the paper boy came closer to him.

“Hah! Haven’t you heard the news about the terrorists? They got a nuclear bomb placed inside the city somewhere and they are threatening to detonate it if certain terms aren’t met.”

“What do you mean the terrorists? Which ones are you referring to, young man?” Damon went on to ask.

“It’s that damned new terrorist sect from the middle eastern part of the Mystic. They have recently been complaining about their fuel being used up by our country. You know, the ones that think we’re all a bunch of heathens and should be exterminated from the Mystic,” the boy replied.

“Okay, I know of them but they weren’t supposed to have any nuclear capability like us! You’re telling me that there is a nuclear

bomb in the city somewhere and those fanatics have their finger on the trigger?"

"Yeah, that's exactly what I'm saying, sir!" the paper boy said with a sense of desperation in his shattered voice.

"Why haven't you run away like the rest of the people, boy? Have you lost your good senses?" Damon questioned him.

"No, I have not," he replied and went on. "Sir, it wouldn't matter much if I died, and anyway my life's purpose has been and still is to distribute this here newspaper to the masses. Somebody must stick around for tomorrow's early edition, you see!"

"But what if it never comes?" Damon wondered aloud, questioning the paper boy further.

"Oh, it will come out all right. It must, you see, because the news is really all that we have left. Otherwise, who can you believe in this world anymore?" the boy said, confidently stating his philosophy of life.

Damon said nothing further on the subject. He just thought about it while shaking his head in a machine-like manner and still continuing to listen to the innocent young paper boy who spoke more fundamental truth than he'd heard from any person in a very long time. It was just he and the paper boy sitting on the mall and they were talking about all of the world as if the crisis didn't exist, oblivious to the chaos that was going on at this moment in the streets. It was like a picture movie for both of them, just another day, while everyone else was in a state of panic and running for cover.

Damon was extremely moved by what the paper boy had just said to him. He'd never really had words with another person who wasn't tied to the war or his own selfish ends. He'd finally met someone who was very unselfish and wanted nothing more than to help other people more fortunate than him get the news. Something inside of Damon was changing because of the boy's love for life and for others even though he could not put his finger on it. There was substance to that kind of unselfishness and he now felt that he'd been part of a big mistake in killing people for a cause that was destined to occur anyway and that there could have been no way of changing the times or the outcome of the human predicament yet to unfold. He remembered Rick Allen the reporter that had been taken hostage and placed inside Camp #1 and he wondered could he free the man or was he dead by now like the rest of

them? For the first time Damon Lane was starting to believe in something other than the war. He suddenly decided as a result of his encounter with the paper boy that his new struggle would be in the war against the absence of free speech. He knew that the only person that would be capable of writing the truth about the horrible injustices that war brings to the less fortunate people was Rick Allen who'd already been dealt some of the injustices. He was a great man and a tremendous reporter. For years the whole world had read about the war from the writings of Rick Allen and now it occurred to him why Rick had been taken hostage by the Resistance. Perhaps those cards had been dealt to him as an act of a much higher power.

Damon knew his next mission must be to free Rick Allen in order for him to write the truth about the war. For certain the man could write from the level of victim of circumstance and he must be freed for the sake of all the paper boys in the world and other orphan children like him. It was a far-fetched idea but Damon was tired of killing people for a dying cause and for a change he wanted his cause to be saving people.

"Boy, I will make a difference for you and the rest in the world who are just like you," he said to the worried orphan paper boy hero before leaving the solitary child to continue selling his papers. He knew the Great Spirit would take care of the youngster even though the boy faced the world all alone.

Damon had become hurried and was in danger of being trampled as he made his way through the city streets that were full of cars overturned by the rushing hordes of panicking citizens struggling to get away to anywhere they could possibly go. Most of them wanted to get to the countryside as far away from the city as they could get. Others had a "doomsday" attitude and just sat by watching the ordeal go down.

Way up high from the many windows in the skyscrapers people were throwing material things out which collapsed as they hit the pavement down below. There was green currency floating down in the air at a slower rate that eventually fell beneath the rushing crowd's shoes and was trampled upon.

Damon had spent his life growing up on a war front and the rushing masses of people in nervous states of mind did not really bother him and right now he was quite calm and his mind was collected. He even stopped walking long enough to help an elderly man that had fallen and

was close to death. He pulled him from the sidewalk and placed him in a chair just before he left the mall area and boarded a vacated rapid transit bus that still had the key in the ignition.

Damon jumped into the driver seat and turned the key. The diesel engine turned over and over and finally it started. “Varoom, Varoom,” was the sound of the powerful cylinders as they poured the burned particles left over from a major explosion into the exhaust manifold and out of its stack. Damon stepped on the foot pedal bringing the iron monster forward into the crowded street full of automobiles moving at a bare crawl. The bus had plenty of momentum but there were no lanes open for it to move into on the crowded streets ahead so he turned the tremendous “locomotive” rapid transit monster hard right and tore into the belly of a skyscraper taking out three dead cars on the way inside. The shattered glass from the building exploded sending broken pieces way into the street and upon the fighting crowds.

The bus came to a stop after digging its way deep into the interior of the building. There were dust particles and bits of fabric still floating in the air as Damon regained his conscious mind and pulled the door lever back in an effort to get out of the bus. The door opened with a shrill air sound and provided a space just wide enough for him to squeeze through. He fell onto the floor of the building that was full of glass, mashed computers and other things. For a moment he looked around still in shock. There were many small aircraft suspended from the building’s lofty ceiling by ropes which kept them from falling while they dangled otherwise freely inside the room. A sign fell at his feet from a broken cantilever and it read, “Free demonstration up on the top level! Free hors d’oeuvres! Come and get it!”

Damon was still very dizzy from the collision with the building but somehow he managed to climb up all thirty stair levels as fast as he could. It took him awhile but finally he spotted the last doorway at level thirty. “Bam! Bam!” he kicked the door open and there it was. A miracle had happened for him on this day. The building was long enough for a small aircraft to take off from and someone had built a mock runway on the top, perhaps to mimic a real-life take-off zone. There were three hang glider air machines at his disposal that salesmen must have previously been using for company demonstration purposes. They had probably never seen actual air time but now the time had

finally come for one of them to be used for actual flight. Damon had flown in many missions that had required him to get behind enemy lines while being undetected up in the air, and besides that he loved to fly anyway. The hang gliders had special gas tanks attached to them for covering extra distances. The builders had seen to that. Damon found a container of fuel and managed to fill up one of the gliders with enough gasoline to make it to the river's edge where he was sure that the masses would overlook him as they went on their way to what everybody thought would be a safe haven for them, anywhere in the countryside but far away from the city.

The glider took off from thirty stories high and resembled a big mosquito departing from the building's edge. The people down below barely noticed its flight as Damon glided it out of the inner city and finally found the river's edge where the hobo camp still remained almost undetectable by the rampaging hordes of escaping people. He brought it down onto the sidewalk close to the Rideon worshippers' encampment. Everyone was gone from the place. Even the hobos had departed for the countryside. From up in the air Damon had spotted a canoe underneath the hobo bridge that had been left behind after the invasion of the Agency's headquarters and somehow overlooked by the fleeing masses so he immediately headed over to its hiding place and pulled it out from underneath its tarp covering. He took one last look at the towering structures of the city and then piled into the canoe and began paddling towards the front lines again. He was heading for the only home he'd ever really known.

Evening was coming on as darkness had expelled the light from the day and then weakened it into almost nothing. Even the city's lights had dimmed and then ceased to shine. Damon knew from experience that he could quite possibly sneak stealthily across the DMZ zone at night using the river. The river was seldom used by anyone of significance. Usually only non-fighters like the poor or maybe escaping families from one side or another frequented the waters at night. He figured that the soldiers would be so taken up with the new developments in the struggle that they would fail to guard it anyway.

Damon was right in his thinking and as his canoe silently shot through the DMZ area there were no soldiers present as both sides had cleared out and been sent out to the countryside. The Resistance

territory of the war zone had been vacated as well. He took a moment to study a lonely-looking old Howitzer 165 that had been left in this desolate location along with the Agency's cannons of war.

There were however many people in dirty war-stained loose clothing that were still moving and scurrying about in the desolate area and there were children crying desperately, many of them separated from their mothers who had gone searching for their husbands fearful of leaving them half-dead in the dark abyss of the remnants of hatred and anger.

"It was someone else's hatred that caused all this," Damon thought to himself as he prowled through the area, paddling his canoe while watching the banks of the flowing river. Finally the water carried him away from the visual torment of the suffering people and to within minutes of Prison Camp #1. He disembarked at the edge of the river and stored his canoe under a shabby grass overhang. Something inside him knew that he'd returned not only to change his own destiny but perhaps that of humanity and the rest of Mother Mystic's creatures as well.

The soil beneath his feet was damp from the river and collected upon his boots as he crawled up the incline of the river bank, far enough to see the candle lights of the prison camp not too far away. He thought he heard voices from the camp but at the same time he wondered whether they were real voices or just ghosts of his past that were somehow taunting him.

There was a sound trailing behind him that came from the water. It was the sound of two oars quietly sloshing in and out of the water as though someone wanted to remain undetected. As he lay in the grass watching the moonlight reflecting off the flowing water another canoe very similar to his own pulled in and a voice drifted over to him from the boat.

"Hello, you fool! What do you think you're doing here?" someone said directly to him in a controlling tone of voice, but Damon did not reply. "I have followed you from town all the way from the hobo camp. Do you know who I am?" the voice went on.

After a moment of thought Damon answered him, "Yes, I know who you are. You are a dead man that has followed me foolishly into this place."

There was a long moment of silence between the two growling

RIDEON

voices and the peaceful sound of the flowing water served to take the sharp edge off the conversation and soothe the raw nerve endings left by the harsh words. The canoe rocked back and forth for a moment's time and then there was the sound of wooden oars being placed somewhere on the boat by the stranger who finally reached the ground with his feet, all the while endangering his life by coming so close to Damon who was only a few feet away.

And then he said, "My name is Rideon and my struggle is not with you, fool! It is with those that are inside the walls of the prison camp."

Then from the moonlight Damon got a look at the stranger. He was at least eight feet tall and had a very large wolf-like head and the sprouted hair from his long nose changed the moonlit air into the moisture that formed upon his snout. Even before he witnessed his profile he had sensed that there was something extremely odd about this stranger.

"You are a mere human like the rest," the stranger went on, "but you are a fine killer of your own kind, and I respect you Damon Lane for who you are, but I will devour you in a very special way unlike the rest if you get in my way or cross me in a wrong way, boy! Like I said! My enemies are inside the compound."

Damon had his revolver cocked and ready to fire but his good sense told him that the bullets would be useless because in the presence of something so powerful as Rideon his natural instincts spoke to him. Even his killer instinct told him to stand aside and let the heavens rumble as they might. He normally would have killed a mere man for coming so close to him in the darkness of the night and in such an arrogant way but this was no mere man but much more like a deity that had just crossed his path.

Damon felt that an extreme psychic energy had just passed over him and even through him and he felt much like a small flower in a field that had been passed over by a spiraling tornado in order for it to continue on a rampageous journey to some other place. He felt like he was only an actor in a much greater scenario and he sensed that something big was about to unfold in the order of time and space.

"Come on," the wolfman said and Damon felt he had no choice but to follow! Pretty soon as the two of them walked towards the prison camp through the high weeds that were now quite dead but still left

standing the wolfman spoke to Damon in a more courteous manner, “It’s just you and me now. We’re going to take these punks out! I have traveled through time to stop this moment from happening. You see even werewolves have to answer to someone. It’s all part of my destiny to put an end to this foolishness. You see your breed acts upon an instinct and it’s called hatred. It’s a selfish way for someone to covet things like material creations of others. You are a foolish breed that loses sight of the over-all parts of the universal reality. You see, you are a bunch of monkeys that will kill each other because one of you has lost a banana to another and then it’s “chop, chop” time for you guys, you know! I like killing your breed but I’m not about to lose the whole damned species to some nuclear chimp that wants to get his banana back. Do you understand me, son?” The great wolfman questioned with some humor in his voice. “Listen! Why don’t you follow me and cover my back, you little killing wonder, and I’ll get control of the main terrorist’s mind. I’ll invade his thoughts with my own ideas. Just follow me inside and keep the garbage off my back with your bullets, okay?”

The quarter mile or so went by very quickly as the two killers walked within a stone’s throwing distance of the high guarded fence that surrounded the prison camp. They hid within the walls of a nearby dry creek bed that allowed them a close enough hideaway to view the guards that were milling about and a whole section of the one-time “horror palace” called Prison Camp #1.

New nuclear guards had replaced the old guards and adorned every corner and hiding place of the terrorist nuclear site. The new guards that stood sentinel at every location imaginable on the premises wore gray uniforms and were of a foreign nationality. All the guards held sub-machine guns which they occasionally pointed up into the sky. The men spoke to each other in hushed tones when they happened to cross each other’s path and although nothing revealing was ever spoken the wolfman’s calculating mind and ESP powers deciphered everything that remained unsaid. Although he could usually make out the words Rideon’s focus was to tune in on the thoughts and the meanings that their ideas conveyed. He was looking for the main man using his telepathic abilities to read each man. Their latent fears would direct him to the leader. It all came back to the origin. Quickly he got a fix on the

main “brain man” for the operation but he could not be sure that he had the top dog with the “bomb finger”. Although his remote sensing capabilities had brought him only the image of a crooked finger he knew that once he saw the finger in real life then he could recognize the man. The memories that he secretly scanned in the soldiers’ minds were just not fresh enough to tell him everything but this in itself told him that the earlier briefings that all of the men had received from their superiors and the prior planning procedures for the takeover were at least two days old in their minds. He could also tell this by their excitement levels which had dwindled down almost to a calmness after the recent possession of the compound. They were settling in which could make a surprise attack easier for Damon and himself.

The seized compound was lit up almost like a burning candle from the electrical lighting that was streamlined throughout all corners of the thoroughly manned camp. Both Rideon and Damon viewed the fenced-in territory from the ditch and were watching the guards carefully for possible weaknesses in their routines. It was also a night of a full moon and Rideon was getting anxious to get into some killing action which made Damon feel extremely nervous about being around him at this time.

“What are you looking at?” Rideon asked of Damon.

“Nothing! I was just looking at all the muscle ripples on your back from the moonlight. I’ve never seen such a sight. It’s terrifying!” was Damon’s response. Then he inquired of the wolf-like beast, “Is it hard when you change over from human form to what you are now? I mean, is it painful to transform into it?” He hadn’t been able to help wondering but felt that maybe he was asking too many questions of the wolfman.

“Last question for awhile, human. Yes, it hurts like crazy until the motions are over. Then it feels good. That’s enough!” Rideon had spoken more words than he wanted to but he needed Damon’s help so he had tolerated the conversation for the time being, but any further chatting was going to be out of the question.

Men from the middle-eastern continent had for years been threatening a major attack on the country and now it looked as though they had finally done it, but now as the headlights of the Agency’s army troops began to appear on the scene they also had an even bigger

decision to make for themselves and for the rest of the world. There were seemingly thousands of glaring headlights coming up the road following close behind one another endlessly before coming up to and then finally encircling the perimeter of the former Prison Camp #1. The tremendously large military trucks that shook the Mystic as they rolled over the untamed landscape could be heard for miles as their diesel engines burned ever more of the “Eastern Man’s” liquids away into oblivion.

This sound enraged the guards inside the fences and they fired their rifles at the oncoming men of war. This caused little damage against the heavily armored trucks and tanks that were now beginning to settle in and find their ground. The Agency fighters were seasoned warriors and were very keen from the years of fighting against a very tough breed called the Resistance soldiers. Most of these men had often times engaged in hand-to-hand combat with the enemy and there was no way they could be spoken of as cowards. This brand of humanity enjoyed the chemical energies and forces that flow naturally inside a man during the heat of a battle making them physically stronger. These men were “adrenaline” killers that would become more aggressive as the fighting intensified and they relished the immediate attention they were drawing upon their arrival onto the scene.

“Yeah, you Middle Eastern scoundrels!” a member of one of the passing troops yelled loudly and almost joyously as his carrier truck moved in closer to the firing lines and some Hummer vehicles quickly followed filling in the gaps in order to encircle the seized compound completely.

The little dry gulch made for a perfect hideaway for Damon and the wolfman as it allowed them to see all the action as it unfolded. Rideon’s humongous head stuck up with his ears pointed as he peered over the edge of the dry creek where he was watching intently still in his wolfen form. More and more of the fastest and meanest tanks that had ever been created by mankind rolled to within inches of the front gate threatening the fences with their cannons aimed directly at the center of the besieged building.

“Do you think these are the same guys that caused the city to evacuate?” Damon inquired of Rideon who tolerated more inquiries and replied:

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“You better believe it! This is the bunch of fanatics that hacked their way through to the President-elect on the primary line and convinced him that they possessed a nuclear suitcase powerful enough to kill every person and creature within the city limits. I was there talking with him with him in special chambers when the news came about. He almost had a stroke on the spot and that’s when I decided to go out and have a look around for myself.”

Rideon explained to Damon that the terrorists had called in the nuclear alarm to the CIA and had left evidence of a nuclear substance inside an abandoned apartment building. Apparently there was enough material left over to cause a city to be evacuated.

“This is not the only place, you know,” he went on. Two other cities in the nation are experiencing similar situations as we speak. The terrorist sect called the “Al Qaida” has chosen to strike simultaneously and I believe their real intent is to destroy the country’s over-all economy. If mass killings were their only interest then they would have triggered the bomb early on and that would have been the end of it. No, there seems to be another reason for all of this.”

“Do you think they are just plain greedy?” Damon asked.

“What do you think?” the wolfman answered and then snickered. Both of them stopped talking for a moment because the area became filled with many sounds of tremendous thunder. It was some of the Agency’s air force jets and they were diving the area on the lookout for any signs of anti-aircraft rocketry.

Damon was close enough to the Agency leader’s Hummer to hear the communications between the flying pilots overhead and the general in charge of the operations.

“Hello, this is Blue Bird Feather calling General Mattel! General, are you there? Over!”

“Yes! This is General Mattel. I have a copy on you, Blue Bird Feather. “Over!” the general acknowledged.

“Anything look like anti-bird weaponry down there, sir? Over!” the pilot asked.

“I don’t see any signs of tactical anti-aircraft machinery down here but they could have soldier-propelled outfits like ground-attack rockets. There is no way to tell you for sure at this time. Over!” the general had to confess.

“Give us a call if you need anything down there, sir. You know we can make it get hot quick. Over!” the pilot exclaimed over the radio.

“Yeah! Good boys! Hold your patterns up there, Blue Bird Feather. We’ll return soon. Over!” the general signed off of the radio because he really had to think for awhile.

The general had been briefed by the CIA and all of the higher-up government officials that the sixth day of the sixth month of the sixth year of the twenty-first century could be a big day. The numbers were truly unique but he and the rest of them just hadn’t realized how big of a day at the time of the meeting.

Rideon Voil stumbled back down the incline of the creek bank over which he and Damon Lane had been watching the action. He decided that the time had come for him to change his appearance so in the belly of the dry creek he immediately started his transformation back into human form. All at once the wolfman dropped onto the soil of the dry creek bed as Damon anxiously watched on. Flesh-popping sounds crackled into mid-air as Rideon’s body was transforming back into a human category. Within minutes all of his long body hair disappeared from his rippling backside and his leather-tough hide turned into a softer human skin. A living man soon appeared at the bottom of the dry creek lying naked before Damon’s very eyes. It was Rideon as a human being and soon he partially awoke from the trance-like state. For moments during this final phase there was the excruciating pain he had told Damon about earlier. Without it the transformation could not have been complete. For a few moments Rideon lost his mind and began yelling profanities into the walls of the ditch.

A soldier that had been studying the area behind the front line of his fellow fighters overheard the yelling and in curiosity came to the bank of the creek to investigate. Damon had seen him approaching and was ready for him. The soldier unaware of Damon who was hidden off to one side of him came to the threshold of the creek and looked over the edge. Upon spotting a naked man at the bottom he naturally began to descend the bank to further investigate. From behind a bush Damon leaped like a cat and caught the soldier as he headed down the steep incline. They both tumbled to the slightly muddy bottom surface below. Rideon became fully conscious at this moment and immediately pounced on the soldier helping Damon and soon they both had him restrained

against the ground but still unharmed.

“Rideon! What are we going to do with this one? Should we kill him?” Damon asked while holding one arm of the confused soldier.

“Ahh! Some men lose it in a battle zone. No! Let’s let him run naked because the general will think he’s gone insane and will not listen to a single word that he tells them,” Rideon suggested.

“Hah! You’re right, wolfman,” Damon replied and chuckled.

So the soldier reluctantly undressed and gave them his clothing and military gear. Then afterwards he was released and allowed to go back into the company of his fellow men buck-naked. He told his superiors about what had happened to him but they only laughed like Damon had done and then they had the innocent man locked up in a paddy wagon under MP observation.

Then another soldier drove a Hummer up a short distance away from Damon and Rideon and in his hurried state left the keys to the truck in the ignition as he ran back to the field.

“Let’s get it, Damon,” Rideon suggested and soon both men claimed the truck. When they climbed inside it started easily. To the general and the rest it must have looked as if a military driver was bringing in a civilian onto the scene for some special reason.

In times past Rideon had spent many sessions at the round table with all of the generals. During recent presidential briefing sessions they had been unaware of his werewolf capabilities and must have figured that he was merely the President’s closest advisor. From the meetings and the little chat sessions he had gotten to know every general by his first name and they had gotten to know his name as well.

“Drive up there next to General Mattel’s Hummer. I want to talk with him,” Rideon ordered Damon who was driving the machine.

“Are you crazy?” Damon responded.

“Yeah, I’m crazy but you’d better do as you’re told or I’ll change back to the way I was for you,” Rideon promised.

“Okay, I’ll do it!” and Damon reluctantly pulled the Hummer into a space directly behind the general’s vehicle.

The great leader General Mattel was standing out in the front of his truck before a very large collection of radios of all sorts. He even had a satellite phone attached to his waistband. He was busy talking with the other officers on the other side of the prison camp as both Rideon and

Damon stood nearby and overheard his conversation on the radio set.

“Yeah! They definitely have something very nuclear in there because our Geiger counters are going crazy out here. Their readings are off the graduated scale! No!” he then said in response to something the person on the other end had said to him and then the general continued speaking excitedly into the radio. “It’s easy to get inside but who’s going to stop the man on the trigger? That’s what I’m worried about! Don’t you know that something that can put out a reading like that could vaporize everything around here including all of us? Look! If you can figure out a way to stop that terrorist with his finger on the nuclear trigger then I’ll authorize an attack on the compound. It can happen very fast but so can other things! Check back in within thirty minutes, captain. Over and out!” and General Mattel threw the radio microphone onto the ground and came over to where the two eavesdroppers were standing.

“What’s up, Rideon? Have you come here for an update for our President?” he asked.

“Yes, that’s it, sir! I have been sent as an advisor and if you don’t mind, my friend and I would like to get involved and maybe we can help. I overheard you saying on the radio that you needed some way to stop the trigger man while your men raid the camp. Well, believe it or not, my friend here has strong mental abilities and is in fact a known psychokinetics expert. He can move things just by thinking that they should move. He might be able to overtake the mind of the man that controls the nuclear device inside long enough to allow your men to invade the place without setting it off.”

“Are you crazy like that buck-naked soldier that came around her earlier?” the general responded.

“No, sir! Watch what he can do if you don’t believe me!” Then everybody stood back expecting something unusual to immediately occur but nothing at all happened.

“Give him a minute,” Rideon suggested and they did. The suspense was growing but nothing appeared to be happening as everyone was looking ahead completely unaware of what was going on behind them.

“This is ridiculous!” the general declared.

“Look behind you, sir!” Rideon said so everyone could hear, and everyone turned around simultaneously to view one of their Hummer’s

floating a couple of feet off of the ground.” It was being levitated secretly by Rideon. He’d focused all of his mental energies towards the task and had managed to lift it for them.

“It’s amazing but can you control strangers’ minds with it?” the general asked of Damon.

“Well, yes it can be done!” Damon responded feeling almost like he was bragging while telling a lie. “Hey, soldier, come here!” he said to one of the young fighters standing nearby and he came over.

“You need to cry,” he said. The soldier immediately began to weep.

“You need to laugh,” and the man quickly began to chuckle and then bellowed out heaving with laughter sounds.

“All right! All right! I believe it!” the general finally conceded. “Listen! You fellows are all that I have at this moment to stop the world from being blown into bits and I don’t know what brought you to me at this time but I’m going to thank the Lord for it anyway. You’ve got to help us!”

“Sure, general! As long as Rideon and I stay as a team you’ll see our mental powers join together and build as a team,” Damon said.

“Okay. You’ll remain partners. I promise,” the general assured them.

A communications soldier approached the men and he was carrying a satellite telephone. “General, a call from the President,” he said.

“Yes, sir! This is General Mattel,” he identified himself and then put the telephone on external speaker so everyone nearby could hear the conversation.

“General, why don’t you use the new nano jackets to get inside? It’s the only way to get in there without forcing the situation and possibly setting off the bomb,” the President suggested.

“But, sir! The jackets are for the most part still untested and they haven’t been proven to be reliable in any case,” the general returned.

“Listen! Do you have any better ideas? Use them anyway!” the President insisted.

The general knew that the new nano technology which rendered the wearer invisible to the naked eye was still unproven technology and might just stop working. There was no way of telling and anything was possible. The tiny computers that made up the fabric of the jacket were much smaller than the diameter of a human hair and they might react

strangely in the presence of very high radiation levels which would surely be present nearby the facility and inside where bomb was being protected.

“One mistake and we are all dead!” the general said back to the President who was still on the other end of the telephone connection.

“What choice do you have?” the President inquired.

General Mattel was carefully considering what his answer should be and did not respond to the query.

“Is Rideon Voil with you as we speak, general?” the President wanted to know.

“Yes, he’s here. What about it, sir?” General Mattel was curious.

“I just wanted to tell you that he’s a good man and I suggest that you let him help you if he can. Call me with your updates. Over and out!”

The President wasted no time in saying goodbye for he was a busy man. He had ordered that the soldiers wear those nano suits recently designed by certain corporations but it was all very new cutting-edge technology that was far ahead of the general’s time. It seemed too far-fetched for the old-fashioned leader and yet what he’d recently seen Damon do in levitating the Hummer was also far-fetched and it had happened, and from that he could not help but think that a certain level of fate had been delivered to him from a higher power and something very real had arrived on the scene.

The terrorists that were holed up inside the compound had started making demands. They were insistent that all of their political prisoners be set free but the Agency was not willing to compromise its standing and no one would ever be set free by them under even under nuclear duress. The city had been evacuated and most of the citizens were now far away out on the countryside living in tent cities that had been set up by the national guard. They’d been forced to leave their urban homes quickly and had been told by the governor to take only enough food supplies to last for a week.

The country’s economy was set to crumble from shutting down many cities and everyone knew it. The President didn’t need to explain the current situation to the masses. They already knew what was going to happen and that the after-effects would be extreme for all of the people, even the politicians, as voting tendencies would change

drastically from this point on. A new beginning for the Resistance movement perhaps would come as the long-ending demise of the Agency's old regime was well underway.

The first night of the nuclear bomb threat passed and another day came as the area began to fill up for miles around with all sorts of curiosity seekers. These were citizens that sat upon the hilltops and high-reaching hillsides looking on from afar onto the many scenes with binoculars and scopes of all sorts hoping to catch a glimpse of someone famous or any casualties. They had all somehow lost their fear of being blown to bits and deserted the safety of the countryside for their interest in the situation at hand. They watched the tanks sitting idle with their cannons pointing inward and observed the vapors from the exhaust pipes which sometimes rose up into the air. It was a drastic scene and everyone could see it wasn't a good day to be an Al Qaida.

A set of double doors opened from the front of the retired jail house and out came two men, one of whom had a pistol that he was aiming at the other's head. "We have one of your kind!" the man holding the gun yelled to the soldiers. It was Rick and he looked battered and bruised. "Send us food and we'll discuss his mortality with you heathens," the terrorist yelled even louder. "We need enough food to last a full week. Yes! There are eighty men here and we all like your Big Mac hamburgers with plenty of french fries as well. Bring us the food and we'll release the prisoner to you. Deny us and we'll kill him!"

He then punched Rick in his backside using the pistol and then pushed him back inside of the old jail house building and slammed the doors behind them.

General Mattel heard the message very clearly and saw to it that a McDonald's pick-up was underway. "Sergeant! I want enough hamburgers and french fries delivered out here to feed them for a week but every third hamburger have a doctor slip some laxative on the meat. Get them C-rations as well and plenty of them. That'll really fix them. I want them to be preoccupied with something other than terrorism."

"Yes, sir! I'll see to it immediately. Plenty of C-rations and laxative hamburgers," the sergeant responded and headed for the mess hall.

Damon and Rideon had been standing around General Mattel's Hummer truck and were watching the scene and Rideon couldn't help mouthing off to Damon, "If the laxative don't get them then the C-

rations surely will!” Everyone laughed including the general. Even though the situation was extremely serious there was still time for some humor amongst the soldiers and their leader.

From an outside view the concrete building looked as if it had been made to create suffering for many lives and in fact it had. The front face of the building was studded with many small windows that had at one time provided only a minuscule amount of freedom to prisoners of war. They had been called the casualties of war, nothing other, and their suffering had been forgotten over time as many innocent citizens were taken to work in the slave camps simply because a work force was needed. These were the poverty-stricken members of the war-torn society and all members of the country were not considered equal as the *Constitution* of the country had been stolen and the people lived without its intention because of national corruption.

It was still morning time and everyone ate breakfast standing up because the general was getting anxious to see a resolution of the matter of this nuclear situation. He was getting testy with his soldiers and everyone else.

“You two men come here!” he said to Rideon and Damon.

They came over to the general and he pulled two coverall-style outfits out of a duffle bag that had been lying in the back of his Hummer and said to them, “These two nano-technology uniforms will render you both invisible to those people inside the jailhouse. I am going to let you wear them to go inside. Stop the man that is in charge of this and kill him if you can! Oh, Damon, I have had you checked out with our security and I know who you are. You’ve been very busy! I don’t like you but if you pull this off I’ll see to it that you get a new identity with a pension. Is everything clear?”

“Yes! But how do you activate these outfits, general?” Damon inquired.

“See the 9-volt battery on the waistline? There is a switch next to the battery and once you have the uniform turned on press the button and everything in the uniform will disappear. That means your body as well!”

“You’re serious aren’t you, general? These things are real!” Damon said and was very impressed by the new stealth technology as were the soldiers standing nearby as he tried the uniform out a couple of times.

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It was “stealth” taken to the highest degree as both he and Rideon disappeared into thin air after activating the circuitry that had been built into the atoms of the nano cloth.

“Hey, you guys quit messing around with the stealth technology! We’re going to provide a distraction and my men will cover for you making it possible for you to get inside,” the general said as he was getting increasingly anxious.

“Yes, sir! But, general,” Damon pointed out, “when the hamburgers come a gate will surely have to be opened in order for them to receive the food. Rideon and I can slip inside at that moment undetected. I can take one of your handheld radios and when we have control of the nuclear device then I’ll click three times on the voice activator button. It will be possible to have your soldiers attack at that time. We will hold our positions around the bomb until I see the whites of your eyes, General Mattel. No other person will be allowed access to it.”

“That sounds like a very good plan, Damon,” the general finally declared after some thought on the matter.

Rideon Voil was standing by off to one side and had distanced himself from the conversation. He was keeping a mental separation from everything for good reason because he was experiencing problems with his medication and he preferred the darkness that the sidelines allowed him at this time. He could involuntarily change back into a wolfen state at anytime and he knew it. Finally he broke into the conversation. “Let’s get it on! I’m wanting to kill something!” Rideon said and in truth meant every word of it even though the general and all of his men thought he was just being humorous and they all laughed.

Time passed until finally the mess sergeant arrived with a wheelbarrow full of food supplies and a buck private he had with him pushed it along. Each Big Mac sandwich had been stacked and wrapped with every third having been doctored up just as the general had ordered. They were ready to approach the front gate. Pretty soon a Hummer pickup truck was rolled up to the gate and an amplified national anthem was played over it in order to get the terrorists’ attention. Then a lieutenant’s voice came over the air announcing, “The hamburgers are here! The hamburgers are here!”

One of the terrorists opened the doorway and Rick appeared out on the concrete landing where he was being led by a masked gunman that

was holding a pistol up to his head. After the gunman studied the area he slowly proceeded towards the front gate with two other men following closely beside him each one holding a rifle.

“Is that the food?” the shadowy figure asked the mess sergeant at the gate of the compound and the other soldiers that were nearby.

“Creak!” the iron hinges of the gate sounded as one of the steel fence gates opened and the gunman looked into the wheelbarrow from a short distance away.

“Listen here, you spooks! These are restaurant-cooked sandwiches and they are ready to eat. Give us the man or no food,” the sergeant ordered. The man holding the gun on Rick suddenly released him to the soldiers standing back from a distance as one of the other terrorists grabbed the wheelbarrow and backed it inside the gate that secured the perimeter of the jail compound. “Click!” went the gate’s deadbolt that was controlled from inside the control room.

The terrorists never had a clue that Rideon and Damon had passed by them the minute the gate was opened. Not a sound was made by the “stealth” invaders who were now waiting nearby the landing in order to get inside the building when the terrorist returned with the wheelbarrow full of hamburgers. They followed close behind the masked men as they passed through each “sally pod” chamber inside the jailhouse walls. “Click, bang! Click, bang!” was the sound that each sliding door would make as one was closed and another one was opened. Pretty soon when the last sliding doorway was opened a large gymnasium type of room came into view for Rick and Rideon Voil and inside it they got a glimpse of the control area for the terrorists’ operation where many men stood around video screens on which they were able to watch every angle of the inside rooms and of the outside yard as well.

Rideon had been patient in holding back his wolfen impulses aroused by the full moon in the sky. He knew he could contain himself only a little while longer because his medication had just about lost its effectiveness. Rick and he were inside the big room now and the nuclear bomb sat in the very center of the gymnasium on a flat-topped table.

“I can’t hold it any longer! Damon, it’s time to rock and roll!” Rideon yelled loudly, his voice booming into every corner of the room. Damon stood back because he was the only one that could see Rideon

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at this time and he watched as the transformation began. The flesh that was once Rideon Voil boiled and almost seemed to melt and then slowly took the form of another creature. Damon watched as the wolfen form took shape and stretched the nano uniform to its electric seams while some of the terrorists approached them in an attempt to find the invisible source of the human voices that they heard. Meanwhile the whole room had gone wild with screaming men.

Damon knew that it wouldn't be long before the nano uniform would become shreds of fabric and would no longer provide Rideon with invisibility. He maneuvered close by the nuclear device where he was going to stand his ground come hell or high water and began shooting the terrorists as they came close or took cover.

The leader was yelling at the men, "Don't shoot the bomb! Don't shoot the bomb!" His voice could be heard above the cracking sound of the rapid-firing small arms. None of the terrorists could see Damon nor could they see where the shots were coming from so they began shooting at each other thinking there had been a mutiny when all at once something extremely large, hairy and frightening appeared on the scene as Rideon had fully transformed and burst the seams of his nano uniform. Just as he appeared into the room a foul odor spread quickly to every part of the gym. There were at least twenty-five terrorists and all of them were looking at Rideon with complete terror in their eyes as Rideon spoke.

"How's my hair looking, Damon?" the wolfman inquired referring to his wolfen features but his words were slurred as his wolfen mouth was not made for speech but rather for eating things. The drool inhibited his speech as well.

"Ah! You look just fine, Rideon!" Damon returned.

Just then a terrorist darted from behind a desk that had been overturned earlier and Damon patiently awaited his arrival but Rideon caught the man with little effort and raised him up from the ground by his hair before he made it to Damon's location. The man's feet kicked violently back and forth as he yelled something in a foreign language.

"Is he cussing me?" Rideon inquired of everyone who stood by watching as he reached around the man's neck and slowly severed his head from ear to ear using the razor-sharp fingernail of his index finger. The body clump hit the gym floor with a "plop" and red blood gushed

out everywhere. Then Rideon stood and straightened his frame out and like an announcer at the starting of a dog race announced, “It’s on, boys!”

The place went crazy with men firing bullets at his fast-moving hairy form, none of them ever catching him as he used the head of each terrorist to slay another one by one. It was a blood bath as the wolfman took killing very seriously when it came to this evil terrorist band of killers.

He saved the leader for the last ceremony as he had just discovered him hiding in the control room behind a locked door in a state of panic. The bodies of the dead terrorists lay in a pile in the center of the room as if Rideon had thrown them there for a final count and maybe for this instance it was all more like work than play. Rideon went over to the doorway that separated life from death for the terrorist inside and spoke to him saying, “You don’t want to play outside with Rideon, huh? Come on out and play. Well, wolfy will just have to come inside and keep you from getting lonely in there!”

“Bam!” he kicked the steel door in and it fell at the cowardly man’s feet and the man began screaming as he dropped his rifle in fear. Rideon entered the room and had a fine meal of fresh brain and body. It was a special meal that he’d been saving his appetite for all along. It was a long slow agonizing death for the leader as Rideon was in no hurry to kill him quickly but preferred a fresh living meal for as long as possible. Damon who remained outside the room allowed the wolfman an uninterrupted dinner because he felt that he’d earned a right to it, then after about ten minutes he finally yelled out to Rideon saying, “I think that I ought to call the general sometime soon. Are you finished eating?”

“Yeah! Call him in!” Rideon’s voice came over the gymnasium area from the room. “Click! Click! Click!” went the radio and Damon could already hear the voices of the soldiers outside as all of the machinery was fired up all at once and they started the invasion. Soon the general and all of the men filled the gymnasium and the place was packed with soldiers carrying rifles and hand guns when all at once Rideon appeared out of the control room and stood in the threshold.

“My God!” said the general. What the h--l is that?” The Agency soldiers almost fired on the wolfman until Damon yelled out, “Don’t

RIDEON

shoot! Stop! That creature is Rideon Voil and he has killed them all but I think he's just about ready to leave us."

And all of the soldiers stood down as Rideon spoke a few words as best he could with his mouth full as he still had a human body part in it which he kept chewing on as he spoke further horrifying everyone in his presence. "See you next time, fellas! I have places to be!" he said with a tone of sarcasm. Then he knocked every dead body that was still lying on the floor out of his way and ran to the inside corner of the jail house building where with one single kick he knocked a big hole in the wall. The concrete wall tumbled before his tremendous frame and he quickly disappeared into the darkness of the shadows. A voice from the shadows could be heard by every man there and it said, "Bye, flies!"

Damon stood next to the bomb as the general gathered his men around the nuclear device and finally moved into the inner circle of them all. Damon raised his arms and tried to retire from the bomb and all of its admirers. He was going to try to make a quick getaway from the scene, perhaps never to be heard from again, when the general spoke up to him saying,

"Damon Lane, killer for the Resistance, and murderer of my late daughter! I'll see you burn in hell for what you have done. "Soldiers, arrest that man!" and the soldiers arrested Damon and took him to a prison where he was later executed by firing squad but if the truth be known the general delivered the killing bullet to his head.

"It's a small world that we all live in!" Rideon said to himself after returning to his real time, the place he truly belonged, and where he hoped that he would never again be called upon by the higher powers to save all of humanity.

THE END